RAID

OPERATION *EAGLE CLAW* 1980

The disastrous bid to end the Iran hostage crisis

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ORIGINS

Revolution in Iran

In November 1979, Iran was in the throes of the Islamic Revolution, with the embassy of the United States in Tehran as the focal point of the people's anger. After decades of friendly relations between the US and Iran, crowds of Iranians, swept up in revolutionary fervor and furious over American policy, stormed the embassy – essentially American territory – taking 66 Americans hostage. The fall of the embassy would lead America to launch one of the most daring operations in American military history to free the hostages – Operation *Eagle Claw*.

In the late 1970s, the misguided policies of the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shainsha Aryameher (King of Kings, Light of the Aryans), were about to come to a head. Despite spending billions of dollars and opening Iran up to western investment, the country was not achieving the Shah's dream of returning to the grandeur of the Persian Empire. Instead, Iran was descending into economic ruin and social discord no matter what the Shah tried to do, because of the corruption of his government and attempts to modernize Iran to western standards too quickly. Even with the overly enthusiastic support of the US, Iran was floundering. Every day the tensions increased between the Shah's Western orientation and the traditional religious and ethnic communities in Iran. Inflaming these tensions were the widening gulf and disparity between the classes, which were fermenting the seeds of a revolutionary explosion. Attempts to quell the spreading discord by using the Iranian army and unleashing the hated secret police, the Savak, only made things worse.

Those opposing the Shah rallied around the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, exiled since 1964 for opposing the Shah's so-called "White Revolution," which sought to sell state interests, grant women more rights, promote literacy, and allow non-Muslims to hold office. Khomeini spoke constantly of the evils of the Shah and the need to restore a religious

President Jimmy Carter is clearly uncomfortable with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, during this White House state dinner on November 15, 1977. President Carter, who campaigned partially on holding world leaders accountable for human rights, was not happy about reports concerning America's erstwhile ally in Iran. (Corbis via Getty Images)

rule of law in Iran. Tapes and copies of his speeches were smuggled into Iran and ferociously consumed by the people, looking for meaning and guidance in the economic and social upheavals rippling through the country.

As Iran was wracked by riots, protests, and strikes, the Shah finally fled the country on January 16, 1979. His departure, and the confusion among the remnants of his government in Tehran, paved the way for Khomeini to return to Iran on February 1, 1979. On February 5, Khomeini declared he

By the time President Carter hosted the Shah, opponents of the Shah's regime were more and more brazen at home and abroad. During the Shah's visit to Washington, DC in November 1977, anti-Shah protests turned violent. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

was forming a provisional revolutionary government. Decades of close US and Iranian relations were suddenly in peril.

On February 14, 1979, about 75 Iranians climbed the walls of the US embassy compound and attacked the chancery, consular section, and residences. Within a few hours, the crisis was over and Prime Minister Medhi Bazargan had restored order, with even Ayatollah Khomeini apologizing. Despite recommendations by some of the Foreign Service officers in Tehran to close the embassy over the incident, and attacks on the US consulates in Shiraz and Tabriz, the embassy remained open.

The Embassy takeover

US President Jimmy Carter was under immense pressure to let the Shah, whose health was deteriorating as he shuffled between countries, into the US for medical treatment. Those that had dealt with the Shah over the years as America's erstwhile ally exerted every bit of influence on President Carter to allow him in. The US Department of State warned Carter not to take in the Shah as it would further inflame the Iranians, who would likely target the US embassy in Tehran. On October 22, 1979, Carter reluctantly agreed to allow the Shah into the United States for medical treatment.

With the admittance of the Shah into the US, the Ayatollah intensified his rhetoric against America, calling the US "the Great Satan." Crowds of protestors, already converging upon the embassy on a regular basis, denouncing American polices towards Iran, reached their breaking point when the Shah landed on US soil from Mexico. They saw this as tantamount proof the US and the Shah were conspiring to overthrow the revolutionary government.

Symbolic of the close relationship between America and the Shah before 1979, the American embassy staff and mission grew larger and larger over the years, encompassing 27 acres and employing more than 1500 people at its peak. The embassy compound was dominated by the large, two-story chancery, which housed most of the mission's offices and the ambassador's office and conference rooms. At the other end of the compound were the consulate buildings where consular officers performed routine services such as issuing visas and providing services for Americans living in Iran. At the opposite end of the compound was the embassy warehouse called the "Mushroom Inn" because it was windowless, hot and humid, and perfect for mold to grow. The ambassador's residence – the Chief of Mission Residence (CMR) – was a large two-story building that served to host diplomatic receptions and living space for the ambassador. The Deputy Chief of Mission Residence (or DCMR) was smaller, but no less impressive. Additional buildings consisted of a commissary carrying American goods, the US Information Agency offices, motor pool and vehicle maintenance bays, four staff cottages, and recreational facilities. Two large fields were in the center of the compound. The embassy compound was a slice of America in the middle of Tehran, under the protection of the host nation, according to international law.

The seizure of the American embassy did nothing to placate the anger of the Iranians. Every day, the crowds outside the embassy protested against American intervention in Iran and demanded the Shah be returned to the country. The big fear of the Operation *Eagle Claw* planners was the unpredictable nature of the crowds. If they materialized during the raid, Delta was prepared to call in fire support from AC-130s lumbering over the city ready to provide covering fire. This photo was taken on November 16, 1979. (Photo by Kaveh Kazemi/ Getty Images)

As the Iranian Revolution intensified in 1978 and 1979, there were internal debates about closing the embassy. In the nascent stages of the Revolution, the Americans hoped the emerging revolutionary leaders would keep an American presence in Iran to counter Soviet influence, keep diplomatic channels open, and provide consular services. Unfortunately, the deteriorating situation prompted the evacuation of many of the embassy staff, their families, and other Americans living in Iran. Between December 1978 and March 1, 1979, over 10,000 American Department of Defense and State Department personnel and their dependents were evacuated from Iran. Thousands of private American companies and citizens also evacuated in haste. Finally, in the fall of 1979 only 66 Americans remained in the embassy.

Early in the morning on November 4, 1979, the now regular protests outside the embassy began to take shape, but this time a group of student leaders with something more than protests on their mind were with the large crowd. Meanwhile, three embassy officers, including the Chargé d'Affaires, Bruce Laingen, were on their way to a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ask for more protection for the embassy. At about 1030hrs Tehran time, an embassy political officer, Elizabeth Ann Swift, made a desperate call to the Operations Center on the seventh floor of the Department of State in Washington, D.C. and reported that a large crowd of Iranians had climbed over the embassy walls and were in the compound. The embassy staff on the second floor were desperately

The US embassy as it looks today. The size of the chancery and the number of buildings around the large compound posed a challenge for the planners. Because of the size, Colonel Beckwith insisted he needed a big rescue force, thus requiring the large number of helicopters. Even at Desert One, when the mission was down to five helicopters and he was questioned if he could proceed and reduce the size of his rescue force, he flatly refused. He needed every single man of the rescue mission or the mission could not continue. The embassy grounds were just too large to cover. (Ninara/ CC-BY-2.0)

trying to destroy classified documents as it became apparent the embassy could fall. In the consular building, the staff scrambled to destroy visa printing plates and other documents before they were able to sneak out and eventually make their way to the Canadian embassy. At the chancery, the Marine security guards, after an hour of trying to keep the mob back on the first floor through non-lethal means, retreated to the second floor. By noon, the Iranians were starting to light fires on the first floor to smoke out the embassy staff. At 1220hrs, Tehran time, the staff opened the door and the embassy fell, with Swift relaying on the phone, "We're going down." Soon, to the shock of the world, American diplomats were being paraded in front of Iranian crowds, blindfolded and with hands tied behind their back.

The storming of the embassy took everyone by surprise. At first, it was expected that the crisis would be over quickly. The idea that a foreign government would support the seizure of an entire embassy and its staff was virtually unheard of. Governments were obligated to protect diplomatic missions in their countries as codified with the Vienna Convention of Diplomatic Relations of 1961, which specified that not only were host governments prohibited from entering embassy grounds, but also that host governments were required to protect an embassy.

The 66 Americans taken against their will by the students were also supposed to have further diplomatic protections under the Vienna Agreement, but it was clear that any semblance of respecting international treaties was gone once the leaders of the Iranian Revolution failed to prevent the takeover. The US was faced with several options if the diplomats were not released soon, ranging from economic sanctions to military action. President Jimmy Carter preferred a diplomatic solution. But if that did not work, could the US rescue the hostages without provoking a wider war?

CHRONOLOGY

November 19, 1977 First Special Forces Operations Detachment – Delta is formed and begins recruitment, selection, and training.

January 1978–February 1979 The Iranian Revolution takes place.

January 16, 1979 The Shah of Iran goes into exile, never to return to Iran.

February 1, 1979 The spiritual leader of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, returns from exile.

February 11, 1979 The Iranian monarchy is dissolved and the Ayatollah Khomeini is granted supreme power.

February 14, 1979 The 27-acre embassy compound is briefly invaded by Iranians who take Ambassador William H. Sullivan and several other Americans prisoner. But Prime Minister Medhi Bazargan sends in troops to free the prisoners and restore order quickly.

April 1, 1979 The Islamic Republic of Iran is proclaimed.

October 22, 1979 The ailing Shah is admitted for medical treatment in the United States.

November 2, 1979 Delta Force completes a large-scale validation exercise.

November 4, 1979 Iranian students seize the US embassy in Tehran.

November 12, 1979 Major General James Vaught takes command of the newly formed rescue effort designated Joint Task Force 1-79. The mission will be planned under Operation *Rice Bowl*.

November 19–20 Iran releases 13 hostages.

November 20–23, 1979 The US issues a series of public and private warnings to Iran that if the hostages are put on trial, there will be military action in accordance with the UN Charter allowing for self-preservation.

December 2–3, 1979 A referendum in Iran overwhelmingly approves the new, theocratic constitution for Iran.

December 4, 1980 Hostage takers announce they will try eight of the hostages.

December 3–6, 1979 Rescue mission exercises, Yuma Proving Grounds, Yuma, Arizona.

December 8, 1979 Beckwith formally criticizes the helicopter pilots to General Vaught in writing.

December 24, 1979 Soviets invade Afghanistan.

December 26, 1979 Six RH-53Ds transferred to the aircraft carrier USS *Kitty Hawk* to transfer to USS *Nimitz*.

December 16–28, 1979 Rescue mission exercises in the desert southwest US.

January 2, 1980 Carter tells his staff to prepare for the worst-case scenario if negotiations break down, including asking Congress for a declaration of war against Iran.

January 16–18, 1980 Rescue mission exercises take place at a classified site in North Carolina.

January 20, 1980 Carter announces Carter Doctrine in response to Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

January 23, 1980 Two more RH-53Ds are loaded on the aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz*.

January 28, 1980 Six of the US employees at the embassy, who had evaded capture by hiding in the Canadian embassy, fly out of Tehran using fake Canadian passports.

January 29–31, 1980 Rescue mission exercises, Area 25, Nevada Test Site, Mercury, Nevada.

February 14, 1980 A group of American hostages are lined up in front of a firing squad and endure a mock execution.

February 26–27, 1980 Rescue mission exercises, Fort Irwin National Training Center, California.

March 1, 1980 Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force Activated.

March 25–27, 1980 Rescue mission exercises, Twenty-Nine Palms, Marine Corps Base, California.

March 30–1 April 1, 1980 Clandestine flight into Iran to check conditions at Desert One.

April 7, 1980 President Carter breaks all diplomatic relations with Iran; expels their diplomats; and embargoes all but food and medicine going to Iran despite Department of State arguing against all the actions.

April 11, 1980 Carter calls another meeting of the key principals and decides a rescue mission must be conducted.

April 14–15, 1980 Final rehearsal for rescue mission.

April 16, 1980 Joint Chiefs of Staff and then President Carter are briefed on the full rescue plan.

April 17–20, 1980 Mission units start to move into theater.

April 21, 1980 Secretary of State Cyrus Vance offers his resignation to President Carter in protest at the mission.

April 23, 1980 Execution phase to be called *Eagle Claw*.

April 24, 1980 The rescue force deploys by two C-141B aircraft to its Forward Staging Base (FSB), Royal Air Force Base on the island of Masirah, Oman.

April 24, 1980 Execute of mission order sent.

April 24, 1980 Operation *Eagle Claw* commences (times based on JTF 1-79 call logs).

1405Z First MC-130E takes off from Masirah.

1506Z Eight RH-53Ds take off from aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz*.
1511Z Remaining MC-130Es and EC-130Es take off from Masirah.
1715Z Helicopter Bluebeard 6 forced to land due to possible mechanical problems.
1740Z Helicopters encounter first dust storm.
1810Z–1930Z C-130s land at Desert One.
1812Z Iranian bus intercepted at Desert One. 44 Iranian civilians were detained. Approaching fuel truck destroyed.
1920Z Helicopter Bluebeard 5 turns back to *Nimitz*.
1930Z Scheduled helicopter arrival time.
2000Z Two MC-130Es take off from Desert One, headed back to Masirah.
2022Z First helicopter lands at Desert One.
2057Z Sixth and final helicopter lands at Desert One.
2120Z Helicopter Bluebeard 2 determined to be unflyable.
2135Z Colonel Kyle and Colonel Beckwith recommend abort mission.
2202Z Mission abort agreed to by Washington.
2222Z Helicopter Bluebeard 3 collides with EC-130E Republic 4, killing eight.
2245Z The surviving MC-130E and two EC-130Es take off from Desert One.
2300Z Helicopter Bluebeard 5 arrives on the aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz*.
April 25, 1980 President Carter publicly tells the American people what happened.
April 26, 1980 Second rescue mission planning begins under Operation *Snowbird*.
April 27, 1980 National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and President Jimmy Carter fly to Camp Peary to meet with Colonel Beckwith and Delta.
May 9, 1980 A ceremony is held at Arlington National Cemetery to honor those who perished in the mission.
July 11, 1980 Release of the American hostage Richard Queen, who was suffering from multiple sclerosis. This reduced the final number of US hostages to 52.
July 27, 1980 Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi dies of cancer in Egypt, where he had flown after being urged to leave the United States. He will be buried in Cairo.
August 23, 1980 The Holloway commission releases report.
September 22, 1980 Saddam Hussein, the ruler of Iraq, invades southern Iran.
October 29, 1980 During a full test of *Honey Badger/Credible Sport*, the heavily modified JATO-assisted YMC-130 disintegrates.
November 4, 1980 US President Jimmy Carter is defeated in the US presidential election by Ronald Reagan.
November 23–24, 1980 Final exercise for a second rescue attempt.
January 19, 1981 The Algiers Accords are signed, constituting the final US–Iran deal to end the hostage crisis.
January 20, 1981 The 52 US hostages are released minutes after Ronald Reagan was sworn in as the 40th US president after 444 days of captivity.

This EC-130E, Republic 4, would be destroyed in the collision at Desert One. Five of the crew perished: (circled, from left to right) Captain Richard Bakke, Technical Sergeant Joel Mayo, Captain Lyn McIntosh, Captain Hal Lewis and Captain Charles McMillan. (DoD)

INITIAL STRATEGY

Military retaliation plans

As soon as it became evident the crisis would not end quickly, the White House issued guidance to the Department of Defense that, while peaceful means would be pursued, military options needed to be ready. The Operations Planning Group began preparing a list of possible targets for a retaliatory strike if the hostages were harmed. Even if strikes were authorized, the targets would be mostly economic to minimize loss of life among the Iranians. Military scenarios developed included strikes against Iranian oil fields, mining Iranian ports, initiating a blockade of Iranian ports, and the seizure of Iran's Kharg Island oil refinery complex to trade for the hostages (Thigpen, 185). The possible drawbacks to military operations in Iranian waters were that it would hurt the world economy as Iranian oil couldn't be exported; the hostages could be killed in retaliation; Iran could try to sink an American ship; or the Iranians could turn to the Soviets to bring in minesweeping ships and aircraft, increasing the chances of clashes between the Soviets and the US. Another plan called for AC-130H Spectre gunships to rake targets along the Iranian coast, supported by US carrier aircraft. Also proposed was Project *Elbow Rub*, which consisted of specially equipped electronic warfare C-130s that could seriously degrade the Iranian electrical networks (Thigpen, 203).

1st Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta

Although Iran possessed a sizeable military, its condition in the chaos of the Iranian Revolution ensured a US victory if the countries went to war over the crisis. However, the bloodshed would be great and there was no guarantee the conflict would remain within the confines of Iran. President Jimmy Carter needed another solution if diplomacy failed. A possible solution emerged with a new, albeit untried, special operations force that had just spent two years preparing for just such an unconventional mission. Within

hours, the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta was looking at the problem.

Just as the Iranian hostage crisis began, Delta was becoming operational. As the threat, lethality, and sophistication of terrorism increased in the 1970s, the US Department of Defense turned to a plan first put forth by Colonel Charles A. Beckwith to form a commando organization patterned after the British Special Air Services. Beckwith, a Vietnam veteran, had served with the 22nd British Special Air Services (SAS) in Malaysia in an exchange program while he was a Green Beret. After working closely with the SAS, he was thoroughly impressed by their capabilities and, upon return to his US Army unit, began advocating for a similar organization within the US. American performance in commando raids in recent years left much to be desired. In May 1975, the attempted rescue of 40 crew members of the container ship SS *Mayaguez* off the coast of Vietnam led to the deaths of 41 US service personnel, and an attempt to rescue American prisoners of war in Son Tay, North Vietnam in November 1970 came up empty-handed. It was obvious the US needed a specialized force such as the one Beckwith was proposing, and after years of Beckwith badgering the Pentagon, it was about to come to fruition.

Colonel Charles Alvin Beckwith (1929–94) relaxing in 1981 after his retirement. Following the disaster at Desert One he would not command another Delta operation and felt he was unfairly treated by the Pentagon for what went wrong. Despite the failure of their debut mission, his First Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta, that he created from scratch, would live on. 40 years later, Delta is still engaged in fighting terrorists around the world. (Photo by Will McIntyre/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images)

On November 19, 1977, Beckwith was given two years to build an entirely new counterterrorist force from scratch, to be called 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta. By April 1978, Colonel Beckwith had his initial selectees for training. These operators were subjected to an intense selection process, measuring them on physical, mental, and psychological qualifications before finally being sent to Delta's new headquarters: "the Stockade" at Fort Bragg. Following selection, the new members underwent intense training to become the premier counterterrorist force of the US military. The skills required included storming airliners, buses, trains, and ships; sniping; close-quarters combat; first aid; psychological warfare; surveillance and countersurveillance; bodyguard skills; navigation; hot-wiring cars; airborne operations; explosives knowledge; lock picking; and every conceivable task that might be necessary to conduct a hostage rescue or clandestine mission. A shoot-house was built where live-fire rescue missions were practiced. These intense sessions often included a fellow operator sitting among the target terrorists while operators stormed in and shot the targets with live ammunition. Room-clearing drills became second nature to all the operators.

In recognition of the very real terror threat, many federal agencies were willing to help with Beckwith's new commando unit. For example, the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) provided Delta as much assistance as they needed, included a passenger jet to practice on. Delta learned how to storm planes by arriving in cargo containers; or going up wheel wells; or sneaking

General Vaught, photographed with Colonel Beckwith at Wadi Kena before Delta moved onward to Masirah. After months of preparation, they are confident the mission will be successful. Vaught would remain behind at Wadi Kenna monitoring the mission from his headquarters, "Red Barn." Despite their close relationship in planning for the mission for months, Beckwith would later write he lost all respect for Vaught when Vaught questioned if the mission could proceed past Desert One with only five helicopters (Beckwith, 254) (DoD)

along the wings of the plane. Delta practiced with the US Secret Service and other federal agencies to learn how to protect and rescue politicians, diplomats, and VIPs. Their training and observation of other allied special operation forces took them around the world.

Meanwhile, much to Beckwith's consternation, other powers in the US Army were skeptical of his ability to form Delta in the time given. To bridge the gap, the Army formed the Blue Light Counterterrorist Group. This force consisted of mostly Green Berets drawn from the 5th Special Forces Group, but while they may have had experience and an infrastructure in place, Beckwith felt that the Green Berets did not have the capabilities or skills to conduct the wide range of missions Delta was preparing for. As Blue Light was being deactivated in August 1978, Beckwith told the Blue Light veterans they would be welcomed in Delta if they could pass Delta's qualifying course and interviews.

During the first few days of November 1979, Delta conducted a final validation exercise by conducting a simultaneous assault on a plane and building. The exercise went off spectacularly and later, exhausted from debriefings and celebratory phone calls, Colonel Beckwith went to bed early on the morning of November 4. No sooner had he gone to sleep than Delta's duty officer called Beckwith at 0700hrs to inform him that the US embassy in Tehran had "gone down" (Beckwith, 175).

Major General James Vaught assumes command

From the very beginning, representatives from different US special operations forces converged on Washington and the Pentagon to come up with ideas to rescue the hostages if a diplomatic solution wasn't found. The mission would entail assaulting a large, multi-building complex, in a city of four million, deep inside of what was now enemy territory, in a region in which not every country had the best interests of the US in mind. In a short time, over 40 plans were proposed, most of them being very unrealistic, bordering on preposterous, running the gamut from sneaking a rescue force in by boat to parachuting in to riding to Tehran on bicycles. The planning, in the early days of November, lacked focus as everyone tried to take measure of what the US was actually capable of doing.

On November 12, Major General James Vaught arrived at the Pentagon from Europe to take command of Joint Task Force 1-79, as the rescue mission became officially known. By November 12, the key commanders were in place: General Vaught would be the overall Joint Task Force commander, Colonel Beckwith would be in command of the Tehran portion, and Colonel James H. Kyle, an Air Force veteran of Special Operations missions in Vietnam, would command the air components. The order was to come up with a plan for the "rapid clandestine insertion into Tehran, with a surprise entry into the Embassy, and with as little violence and loss

of life on either side as possible. Then a rapid exfiltration of the rescue force and hostages." As a security measure, the planning would be undertaken as "Operation *Rice Bowl*" to give the impression it was part of humanitarian relief efforts in Asia (Lenahan, 38).

Whatever the final plan was, Delta was faced with a number of challenges they had not trained for previously. Critically, for the previous two years Delta trained to operate in permissive, friendly environments with the full support of the host governments. For this mission, they were expected to operate in hostile terrain with very limited support or help from the outside. Secondly, Delta had to be able to mount the assault and get out with the hostages without a massacre in the streets taking place. Without assurances the plan would keep civilian casualties to a minimum, the mission would not go forward.

Secrecy and security were the overriding concerns. The mission would be entirely ad hoc so as not to draw attention, getting only the necessary personnel and doing so discreetly, out of fear the Soviets would notice the sudden disappearance of teams of specialized men or equipment. However, the compartmentalization and operational security would deny planners tactical expertise and knowledge they needed for this mission. When asked if friendly special operations forces around the world could be used or consulted, General Vaught replied, "Absolutely not."

By November 16, the basic concept called for a two-night operation in which MC-130E Combat Talons and KC-135Bs would take off from Wadi Kena, Egypt, fly down the Red Sea, around Saudi Arabia and then into Iran. They would then airdrop 500-gallon collapsible rubber fuel bladders, or blivets, or land somewhere in Iran to refuel helicopters coming from ships off the coast of Iran. The raiders would then move north to prepare to assault the embassy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the second night. Many details needed to be worked out, but the initial concept seemed to be feasible. They were confident the takedown of the embassy would be straightforward, but the problems of getting in and out of Iran, undetected by Iranian forces, haunted the planners.

As rough ideas of a plan were being devised, the number of rescuers needed increased exponentially. Delta simply did not have the manpower to cover all the key tasks of the mission, but Beckwith absolutely did not want another unit added on to the ground force, as this would cause too much confusion and problems because of different organizational cultures and training. Beckwith, however, was overridden by General Vaught and C Company of the 1/75th Rangers was given the task of seizing an airfield for extraction once the hostages were freed. They would also provide a watch team for any refueling rendezvous inside Iran.

While the air component of the mission was being deliberated, Delta increased the tempo of their preparations. Delta would concentrate on seizing the embassy – "action at the objective" – while others worried about how to get them in and out of Iran. Mockups of the embassy were constructed so the rescuers could practice over and over the tactics of storming the embassy, finding the hostages, and getting them out. A detailed 8ft model of

Following the takeover of the American embassy in Tehran, the Iranian students were surprisingly organized in their occupation and kept the massive crowds from spilling over the gates during their daily protests against America. Here, the students guard one of the gates, while members of the international press try to get good photos and the crowds outside gather in support of the hostage takers. (Photo by Alain MINGAM/ Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

the compound for the rescuers to study even came with removable roofs to see how floors were laid out. Blueprints and interviews with former embassy employees revealed countless details that needed to be taken into account.

There were hundreds of questions that needed to be answered: what it would take to blow open or knock down doors, how to get into buildings, how tall were the walls around the compound, where stairways led, how could power be cut, how long would it take to move through the compound, and how to divide up the rescuers. Some of the team were dispatched to other American embassies to study their layout, research the doors and windows, and even order the exact same doors to study how to breach them (Vining). Special training walls were constructed so Delta could practice going over and over them in full gear until they could do it in their sleep. Training to take the embassy was so secret, precautions had to be taken to hide it from passing Soviet spy satellites. Outside, the white engineer tape used to delineate the outline of the walls and buildings of the embassy was removed when satellites were due to fly over and then laid out again once they flew by. Over and over they rehearsed and practiced until they came up with what they thought were solutions to the embassy assault.

By late November, Delta had deduced what buildings the hostages were likely being kept in from observing the newscasts and from the 13 hostages released in late November. Through a process of elimination, they crossed off embassy compound buildings without cooking facilities, in a poor location, or good heating. From this they eliminated buildings like the motor pool and consular affairs. The chancery was an obvious place for the hostages to be held in, as were the staff cottages on the compound. Delta also tried to develop a psychological profile of the students guarding the hostages: their evaluation was that the students, once the initial fervor had passed, and the seizure had fallen into a dull routine, would not be enthusiastic about hurting the hostages. It was possible they would even throw down their

weapons without a fight. Delta practiced and planned for driving to Turkey or Afghanistan if anything went wrong, including learning basic Turkish and Farsi to bluff their way past checkpoints and border controls.

On November 20 and 23, the US made it clear that if Iran put the hostages on trial, there would be military action in accordance with the United Nations Charter provisions for self-defense. At the same time USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63) carrier battle group was sent from the Pacific to the Arabian Sea to join USS *Midway* carrier battle group (CV-41). Affectionately known as Gulf of Oman Naval Zone of Operations (GONZO Station), the seas around Iran were soon teeming with naval forces.

C-130s from around the world

With a basic concept agreed upon, getting in and out of Iran would be a task for C-130s, and word quietly went out to C-130 squadrons scattered around the world to prepare for a mission. The exact variant of the C-130 needed was the MC-130E Combat Talon, a modified C-130 that first entered service in 1966. To all, it was obvious that whatever plan was chosen, night operations, a combat assault, and refueling, either in flight or on the ground, possibly under fire, would come into play. Combat Talon aircrews around the world, such as the 1st Special Operations Squadron (SOS) in Okinawa, the 1st SOW (Special Operations Wing) in Florida, and the 7th SOS in Europe, were practicing the skills needed for the mission, even if they did not know exactly what the plan would entail.

The task of coming up with the tactics and procedures to conduct landings with C-130s in complete darkness on an unlit rough landing strip fell to Air Force Colonel Bob Brenci. Night Vision Goggles (NVGs) were so rare in the US Air Force in 1979 that the only unit to possess them in the Air Force was the rotary 20th SOS, which would not loan them out without

At Masirah, the aircrews of the EC-130s and MC-130s take time to pose with their aircraft immediately before their launch. Dragon 2, pictured here, like the rest of the aircraft has nationality, squadron, tail numbers, and safety markings painted over. The crew wear typical flight crew suits and are wearing air crew survival vests. (DoD)

a hand receipt of $200,000. Brenci brushed off the comments that C-130s could not operate with NVGs and began familiarizing the MC-130E crews with the AN/PVS-5 NVGs in darkened rooms (Kyle, 75–76).

The crews soon refined the procedures and perfected, as best they could, landing under total blackout conditions, conducting the first NVG flight of a Combat Talon on November 26. The Air Force did not even have a manual for this kind of flying and there was even a discussion that the pilots needed waivers and written permission to fly under conditions they were wholly unqualified for (Thigpen, 179). To further improve their ability to conduct these treacherous landings, Lt Colonel Kenneth Oliver came up with the idea of mounting the right type of infrared paper over the landing lights that, while invisible to the naked eye, would produce an illuminating beam with NVGs (Thigpen, 188).

AC-130H Spectre gunships were assigned to the mission to provide suppressing fire against Iranian forces and crowds. Entering into service in 1968 and armed with 7.62mm miniguns, 20mm autocannons, and a 105mm howitzer, they could loiter over targets in Iran and destroy or suppress any Iranian forces, aircraft, or even crowds on the ground. Many of the rescuers had worked with the gunships in Vietnam and knew their capabilities and how to coordinate actions with them. The AC-130Hs during the operation would operate out of Guam, refueling before entering Iran.

The helicopters

For the assault on the embassy, planners settled on the RH-53D Sea Stallion minesweeping helicopter. RH-53Ds on board aircraft carriers would not attract undue attention because the Straits of Hormuz needed to be swept for mines and minesweeping helicopters on board an aircraft carrier would not appear unusual to the prying Soviet ships that always shadowed the US Navy. The RH-53D Sea Stallions had a folding tail and rotors, allowing them to be stored below deck. They could also be outfitted with external

The RH-53Ds aboard USS *Nimitz* after being painted a desert tan color. The reason this model was selected for the mission is evident by the photographs. By being able to fold the tail boom and main rotors, the helicopters could be stored below deck, out of sight of the prying eyes of the Soviets and other unfriendly nations. (DoD)

With Soviet spy vessels ever-present around US warships, operational security was paramount and the RH-53Ds had to be hidden below deck. This spy trawler was photographed from USS *Okinawa*, part of the fleet of ships operating in the GONZO (Gulf of Oman Naval Zone of Operations). (Courtesy Sergeant James Bancroft, USMC)

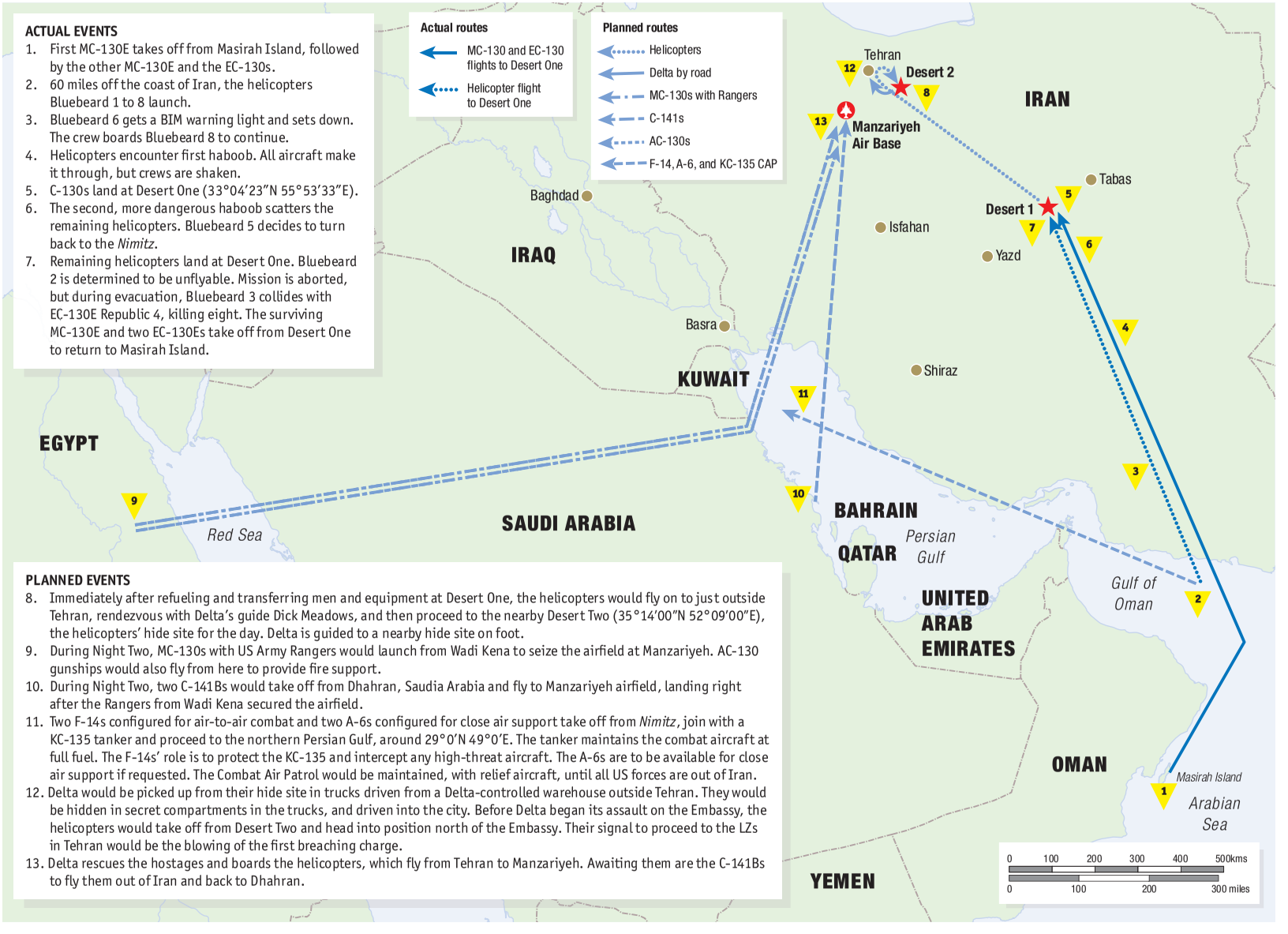
fuel tanks, and they had the carrying capacity to carry the fully loaded commandos and hostages out of Tehran.

Naval Squadron HM-16, the "Seahawks," had just completed training in Canada with their RH-53Ds when they were unceremoniously given a no-notice order to deploy to the Indian Ocean, and within 36 hours the helicopters and maintenance personnel were on board the aircraft carrier USS *Kitty Hawk* to transfer to USS *Nimitz* (CVN-68) when it arrived. Even if the mission had to use the RH-53Ds, Colonel Kyle preferred having Air Force helicopter pilots with experience in desert flying, combat tactics, and using NVGs, but was denied because of operational security needs (Kyle, 59).

Intelligence-gathering

Intelligence on the hostage-takers, their plans, and disposition of the hostages was problematic from the beginning. There was simply no way exactly to know the routines and locations of the guards at the embassy or how Iranian forces would react during a hostage rescue attempt. Nobody could say with accuracy where the hostages were held, but visiting foreign diplomats reported hostages were held in as many as six different buildings on the compound. Nor was there a clear picture on the layout of the hostages being kept in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

To make up for this, the US began infiltrating ground personnel into Iran to look at the targets close up. While he had help from the CIA, which managed to get six agents inside Tehran, Vaught needed to augment them with his own men. The planners scoured US military records looking for anyone who spoke Farsi, knew Iran, and could infiltrate the country. One of those on his way to Iran was Changiz Lahidji, a US Army Special Forces soldier of Iranian descent. He would enter Iran and gather as much intelligence on the current situation and then assist in picking up the rescuers and bring them to the embassy. He also acquired a bus in case the helicopters could not land at the embassy or soccer stadium and needed to be ferried to another site. His observations were given to his contacts in Germany or mailed to the German embassy. Despite his training and professionalism, he


ACTUAL EVENTS
1. First MC-130E takes off from Masirah Island, followed by the other MC-130E and the EC-130s.
2. 60 miles off the coast of Iran, the helicopters Bluebeard 1 to 8 launch.
3. Bluebeard 6 gets a BIM warning light and sets down. The crew boards Bluebeard 8 to continue.
4. Helicopters encounter first haboob. All aircraft make it through, but crews are shaken.
5. C-130s land at Desert One (33°04′23″N 55°53′33″E).
6. The second, more dangerous haboob scatters the remaining helicopters. Bluebeard 5 decides to turn back to the Nimitz.
7. Remaining helicopters land at Desert One. Bluebeard 2 is determined to be unflyable. Mission is aborted, but during evacuation, Bluebeard 3 collides with EC-130E Republic 4, killing eight. The surviving MC-130E and two EC-130Es take off from Desert One to return to Masirah Island.
Actual routes
MC-130 and EC-130 flights to Desert One
Helicopter flight to Desert One
Planned routes
Helicopters
Delta by road
MC-130s with Rangers
C-141s
AC-130s
F-14, A-6, and KC-135 CAP
Tehran
Desert 2
IRAN
Manzariyeh Air Base
Baghdad
IRAQ
Tabas
Desert 1
Isfahan
Yazd
Basra
KUWAIT
Shiraz
EGYPT
Red Sea
SAUDI ARABIA
BAHRAIN
QATAR
Persian Gulf
Gulf of Oman
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
OMAN
Masirah Island
Arabian Sea
YEMEN
0 100 200 300 400 500kms
0 100 200 300 miles
PLANNED EVENTS
8. Immediately after refueling and transferring men and equipment at Desert One, the helicopters would fly on to just outside Tehran, rendezvous with Delta's guide Dick Meadows, and then proceed to the nearby Desert Two (35°14′00″N 52°09′00″E), the helicopters' hide site for the day. Delta is guided to a nearby hide site on foot.
9. During Night Two, MC-130s with US Army Rangers would launch from Wadi Kena to seize the airfield at Manzariyeh. AC-130 gunships would also fly from here to provide fire support.
10. During Night Two, two C-141Bs would take off from Dhahran, Saudia Arabia and fly to Manzariyeh airfield, landing right after the Rangers from Wadi Kena secured the airfield.
11. Two F-14s configured for air-to-air combat and two A-6s configured for close air support take off from Nimitz, join with a KC-135 tanker and proceed to the northern Persian Gulf, around 29°0′N 49°0′E. The tanker maintains the combat aircraft at full fuel. The F-14s' role is to protect the KC-135 and intercept any high-threat aircraft. The A-6s are to be available for close air support if requested. The Combat Air Patrol would be maintained, with relief aircraft, until all US forces are out of Iran.
12. Delta would be picked up from their hide site in trucks driven from a Delta-controlled warehouse outside Tehran. They would be hidden in secret compartments in the trucks, and driven into the city. Before Delta began its assault on the Embassy, the helicopters would take off from Desert Two and head into position north of the Embassy. Their signal to proceed to the LZs in Tehran would be the blowing of the first breaching charge.
13. Delta rescues the hostages and boards the helicopters, which fly from Tehran to Manzariyeh. Awaiting them are the C-141Bs to fly them out of Iran and back to Dhahran.

could not help but be afraid himself. He was in the middle of Tehran in the throes of a revolution with the government and population expressing their hatred of America daily. He did his best to resist calling or talking to his family, relatives, or old friends (Lahidji, 20).

Another was Air Force avionics Airman Fred Arooji, a native Iranian. After months of training, and a contentious first encounter with Beckwith, who implied that Arooji was not going to perform to his standards, he was dispatched to Iran to acquire vital intelligence on the mission objectives, acquire a warehouse and vehicles for the rescue party, and help guide the rescue force into Tehran.

Also working his way into Iran was Dick Meadows, a retired Special Forces soldier, who worked closely with Delta in its infancy. When he volunteered to go into Iran and be part of the mission, the CIA was less than enthused since he was not a trained covert operative. Meadows' background was purely tactical military operations. But from that experience, he knew what information Delta needed. The mission planners needed to know the answers to countless questions, and almost all of them could only be answered by men on the ground. The CIA eventually relented and agreed to help Meadows, issuing him an Irish passport, giving him some rudimentary training, and sending him to Tehran as a representative of a mining company. He spent his time in Tehran without incident, gathering the necessary information and relaying it back and laying out communications equipment at rendezvous sites (Hoe, 154–58).

To scout out the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where three of the hostages were being held, some of Special Forces Detachment-A – who had previous experience in Iran but were now based in Berlin – were sent in. They would pose as German businessmen and concentrate on gathering intelligence around the Ministry building. The men who infiltrated Tehran were so good at their mission that some actually gained entry to the Ministry, and another had pictures taken of himself with some of the students at the embassy (Stejskal).

By the end of April, US intelligence estimated the composition guarding the hostages to be 60 percent students; 10 percent Fatah-trained militants; 15 percent Pasdaran militia; and 5 percent PLO advisors (Lenahan, 108).

Planning and rehearsals

By late November, the concept of the operation was starting to come together and now called for a two-night operation in which MC-130E Combat Talons and KC-135s would take off from Wadi Kena, fly southeast over the Red Sea, skirt around Saudi Arabia, and then fly into Iran. They would then drop 500-gallon rubber fuel blivets or land to refuel the helicopters flying north from the US fleet in the Arabian Sea. One plan called for the seizure of an airfield for the helicopters to refuel at. It was also thought that Delta should insert into Iran by helicopter from USS *Nimitz*. This was not a popular idea because there was no chance that so many operators could get aboard the *Nimitz* without attracting attention, nor did Beckwith's men trust a helicopter flight of that length to be reliable. The airfield refueling

USS *Coral Sea,* stationed off the coast of Iran for Operation *Eagle Claw*. Along with USS *Nimitz*, this carrier would provide air cover if the Iranians challenged any part of the rescue mission. In response to the Iran crisis, the *Coral Sea* spent 102 days at sea. USS *Nimitz* spent 144 days at sea in response to the Iran crisis, finally returning to home port on May 26, 1980. (DoD)

option was kept as a backup, but it looked like the airdropping of fuel blivets or finding a refueling rendezvous point somewhere in Iran were the likely courses of action (Kyle, 125). It was just a question of practicing to get everything right.

Whatever the final plan was, the rendezvous and refueling of the helicopters was going to be the most complex part of the rescue mission. On November 28, the plan was sufficiently developed that an Operations Order was issued detailing the sequencing and objectives of the operations. Beckwith still felt the transportation of Delta into Iran was driving the planning and sent a message to General Vaught on November 29 stating that "mission support must not dictate the phasing of the ground tactical plan instead of supporting it" (Lenahan, 54).

By Christmas, two critical decisions were made. The airfield to seize and then fly the freed hostages out of Iran would be Manzariyeh, 50 miles south of Tehran. The runway was two miles long and 140ft wide, making it capable not only of handling incoming C-141Bs, but also allowed the helicopters, MC-130s, and C-141Bs plenty of room to maneuver. AC-130Hs would orbit above providing covering fire. Secondly, Diego Garcia and Guam were finally scrapped as an operating point with Wadi Kena in Egypt becoming the choice for the staging base.

Winter and spring rehearsals

In December, Vaught felt confident enough in the various units' training for their parts in the operation to bring different elements to remote deserts and airfields in Arizona, California, and other locations in the southwest for a series of seven exercises between December 1979 and April 1980. By this time Delta had conducted dozens upon dozens of practice assaults on the embassy mockups and was eager to practice larger joint exercises (Lenahan, 105). The rehearsals would never bring the entire mission together for a large-scale dress rehearsal of the operation, because of the need to maintain operational security, but they could at least practice the key skills. Numerous

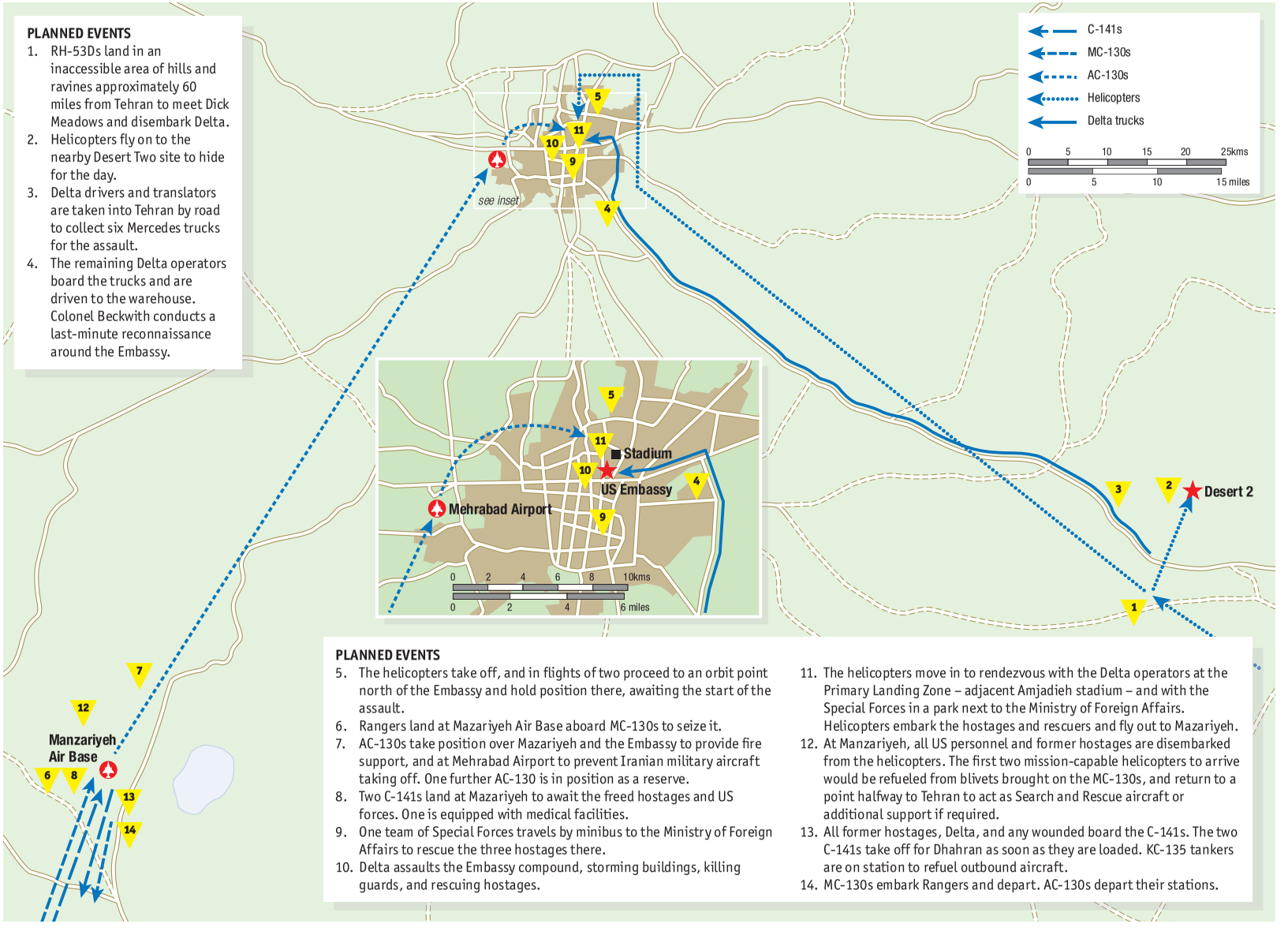
lessons were learned in the process of refining the tactics and equipment. The airdropping of fuel blivets was especially difficult to master. In fact, during the first attempt, they were not rigged properly for a parachute drop that night, and seven out of ten crashed into the ground with a sickening splat, leaving small craters of fuel. When they were tried again, the blivets survived but were scattered too far apart. Refueling with bladders in the planes was problematic, as the equipment was difficult to master or the hoses were too short. In other cases, assault aircraft carrying the Rangers landed out of sequence. Crews had difficulty mastering new equipment they had never trained on, or skills that they had not been taught. At rendezvous points, there was confusion until hand signals and clear controls were established. Helicopters were consistently late, lost, or grounded because of weather. Navigation systems failed and mechanical systems experienced problems. In some areas, the exercises did what they were supposed to do and helped the men refine their tactics and adjust the plans. In others, the problems were brushed over. For example, twice during the exercises, one of the helicopters experienced a problem with the Blade Inspection Method (BIM), indicating a possible rotor blade failure. Yet no plan was developed to handle such a problem once inside Iran (Kyle, 190).

The helicopter pilots

Consistently, during the exercises and afterwards, the commanders came to the same conclusion – the Navy helicopter pilots, who did not have the prior experience or training to execute a special operations mission under fire, would have to be replaced. Beckwith was especially harsh, wanting more aggressive flying than the pilots were used to. From the beginning, Beckwith felt the pilots were not qualified for the mission and did not live up to his standards. He complained they were staying at regular hotels, making phone calls home, and were by all appearances not as serious about the mission as Delta was. They were having a hard time adjusting to what the mission would entail. The pilots were shaky as they were put through their paces and even Delta's psychologist had no confidence in them. (Beckwith, 208)

Beckwith's men were expressing open disdain at the prospect of flying into Iran on the helicopters and the exercises only confirmed their misgivings, as they were tossed about like sandbags while the pilots learned how to fly low-level missions. Delta personnel did not believe the helicopter pilots were a crack unit and lacked the attitude, motivation, and

The helicopter crews wish each other luck and prepare to crank the engines. The pilots, despite only a few months of training and used to flying a different model of the helicopter, are confident of success. Because their weather briefings did not mention the high probability of haboobs, they are not concerned about the removal of the Engine Air Particle Separator filters to give the helicopters extra speed and lift off capability. It is 1445hrs Zulu Time, April 24. (DoD)


PLANNED EVENTS
1. RH-53Ds land in an inaccessible area of hills and ravines approximately 60 miles from Tehran to meet Dick Meadows and disembark Delta.
2. Helicopters fly on to the nearby Desert Two site to hide for the day.
3. Delta drivers and translators are taken into Tehran by road to collect six Mercedes trucks for the assault.
4. The remaining Delta operators board the trucks and are driven to the warehouse. Colonel Beckwith conducts a last-minute reconnaissance around the Embassy.
C-141s
MC-130s
AC-130s
Helicopters
Delta trucks
0 5 10 15 20 25kms
0 5 10 15 miles
see inset
Stadium
US Embassy
Mehrabad Airport
0 2 4 6 8 10kms
0 2 4 6 miles
Desert 2
Manzariyeh Air Base
PLANNED EVENTS
5. The helicopters take off, and in flights of two proceed to an orbit point north of the Embassy and hold position there, awaiting the start of the assault.
6. Rangers land at Mazariyeh Air Base aboard MC-130s to seize it.
7. AC-130s take position over Mazariyeh and the Embassy to provide fire support, and at Mehrabad Airport to prevent Iranian military aircraft taking off. One further AC-130 is in position as a reserve.
8. Two C-141s land at Mazariyeh to await the freed hostages and US forces. One is equipped with medical facilities.
9. One team of Special Forces travels by minibus to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to rescue the three hostages there.
10. Delta assaults the Embassy compound, storming buildings, killing guards, and rescuing hostages.
11. The helicopters move in to rendezvous with the Delta operators at the Primary Landing Zone – adjacent Amjadieh stadium – and with the Special Forces in a park next to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Helicopters embark the hostages and rescuers and fly out to Mazariyeh.
12. At Manzariyeh, all US personnel and former hostages are disembarked from the helicopters. The first two mission-capable helicopters to arrive would be refueled from blivets brought on the MC-130s, and return to a point halfway to Tehran to act as Search and Rescue aircraft or additional support if required.
13. All former hostages, Delta, and any wounded board the C-141s. The two C-141s take off for Dhahran as soon as they are loaded. KC-135 tankers are on station to refuel outbound aircraft.
14. MC-130s embark Rangers and depart. AC-130s depart their stations.

*esprit de corp*s of an elite force. They did not seem committed to the mission, and while they may have been excellent pilots in their normal roles, this was not a mission they were mentally prepared for (Fitch).

Beckwith wrote to General Vaught, not hiding his disdain for the pilots, on December 8, saying that high standards "were not considered in selecting the helicopter crews to insert and extract Delta from Iran… [During one exercise] Their ability to fly at night did not improve… In fact, it was fortunate that we did not lose an element of Delta as a result of a helo crash" (Lenahan, 66).

Vaught accepted Beckwith's complaints and broached the subject with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Jones. Now, the Marines would provide some of the pilots, with Marine Colonel Chuck Pittman leading them through rigorous training. Six of the seven Navy pilots were replaced with Marines and the pilots and co-pilots now consisted of 12 Marines, three Navy, and one Air Force. This mismatch of personnel was troubling, but it was assumed the different models of the helicopters were similar enough that there would not be a problem flying the RH-53Ds.

Colonel Kyle disagreed with the new pilots, feeling that five Air Force pilots could have been brought in from Air Force H-53 squadrons. The Air Force pilots had combat flying experience in Vietnam, including low-level flying and operating in dusty conditions. Kyle even openly expressed his hope the decision not to use the Air Force pilots wouldn't be regretted later. Beckwith also suggested there seemed to be an effort to get all the branches of the US armed forces into the operation and General Jones did not want to take the helicopter mission away from the Marines (Kyle, 120–122).

In January, while the rescue forces were training out in the desert, the USS *Nimitz* arrived in the Indian Ocean to replace the USS *Kitty Hawk*. The six RH-53Ds that had been on board USS *Kitty Hawk* since November 28, 1979 were transferred to *Nimitz* to join two other RH-53Ds picked up earlier en route to the Indian Ocean. The operational name to provide full support to the helicopters and crews was designated *Evening Light.*

The helicopters had only been flown for five or six hours each over the past two and a half months due to shortage of parts, in part due to the fact the carrier was at the tail end of the supply chain and getting supplies and spare parts was a long and arduous process. Helicopters 7 and 8 had not even been flown since arriving, having been cannibalized for parts to keep the others flying. Operational security had been so good that the *Nimitz* personnel really were convinced the helicopters were solely there for the cover story of minesweeping operations and were maintained accordingly. When word of the problem reached the Pentagon, the captain of the *Nimitz* was made fully aware of the situation and told to take corrective action immediately (Kyle, 138).

Scouting mission to Desert One

With the plan taking shape, the question arose of where the helicopters would refuel inside Iran. The Defense Intelligence Agency, based on the ranges of the helicopters and C-130s, scrutinized countless data and photos of the

area around the Dasht-e-Kavir salt desert, looking for a suitable landing area. The rendezvous site had to be flat and big enough to accommodate all the aircraft coming in and taking off; it had to have a firm floor to prevent the aircraft from bogging down; and it had to be isolated enough that the whole refueling exercise could be pulled off without being detected.

A possible refueling and rendezvous site, designated as Desert One and located at 33°04'23"N 55°53'33"E, soon emerged in the Dash-e-Kavir salt desert, 530 nautical miles inland from the south coast of Iran. The only drawback was a supposedly little-traveled road, running right through the site, connecting the towns of Yazd, 114 miles to the west, and Tabas, 68 miles to the east.

To confirm this was a suitable location, plant navigation aids, and find out if aircraft could get into Iran undetected, the CIA launched a daring mission into Iran on March 30 to find out everything they could about Desert One. Under the guise of geologists, a de Havilland DH-6 Twin Otter, with two CIA pilots, including Paul B. Ryan, who had lost a leg in Vietnam, and an Air Force Combat Controller, Major John Carney, made a four-hour flight from Oman to the proposed Desert One site. The plane, flying nap of the earth, 200ft or less above the ground, was crammed with the men, a fuel bladder, a fold-up motorcycle, and gear. Also on board were thousands of dollars in gold South African Krugerrands to bribe their way out of whatever problem they found themselves in if things went wrong (Carney, 81).

If any of the men became separated or the Otter had problems, leaving him or the whole team on the ground, they would have to be rescued by two MC-130Es on standby equipped with the Fulton Recovery System. This system required a man to fasten himself via a thin cable to a balloon. As the balloon rose, it would lift the man with it; an MC-130E equipped with poles that looked like a pair of open scissors would fly in, snag the cable, then reel the man into rear ramp. It was a proven concept, but nobody wanted to bet his life on it in the middle of Iran (Carney, 76).

Upon landing, the team scattered on foot and with the motorcycle to deploy the Tactical Air Navigation System (TACANS) and five remotely activated strobe lights to guide the planes in. They had barely an hour in which to do their work, and Carney would later say it was the shortest

The gear needed for the rescue mission undergoes final checks. The ladders would play a key role in assaulting the embassy. The plan called for Delta to quietly and quickly scale the embassy walls into the compound and take up positions. When ready, explosives would blow a hole in the compound wall, signaling the start of the operation. The men would get the hostages out through the hole, across Roosevelt Avenue and into the soccer stadium next door where the RH-53Ds would be descending to take them to freedom. One of the weapons visible is an MP5 to be used by the Special Forces Detachment-A in the assault on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to rescue the three hostages there. (DoD)

hour of his life. Carney, dressed in Levis, a black shirt, and black cap, marched off the landing site. Out in the remote desert, he and the others were armed only with H&K MP5SD 9mm automatics with silencers, which he knew would not help if they met any Iranians who did not believe the lost geologist story (Carney, 77). They took soil samples, verified there were no natural obstacles, and buried infrared beacons, partially developed with the assistance of the CIA Office of Technical Services. Four were planted to form a box 90ft by 300ft wide and a fifth 3,000ft away to mark the end of the landing area. The idea was that the planes would touch down in the box and stop by the end of the 3,000ft.

After the covert mission took off, the intelligence apparatus of the US monitored the site for days looking for any sign that the Iranians had been tipped off that something had gone on at the site. The soil samples and testing were fruitful and proved the ground could handle the weight of the incoming aircraft and helicopters.

Weather

As planning for the rescue mission continued, attention soon turned to Iran's weather. Captain Donald "Stoney" Buchanan, climatologist and satellite meteorology expert, was picked to head up an eight-man cell at Ouffet Air Base in Nebraska to study the weather and environmental conditions at the likely operational points. While experienced personnel and experts in the field, none of his cell had any experience working with special operations, nor was anyone from special operations assigned to their task force to help.

One condition identified by Buchanan's team almost immediately were the giant dust storms, or haboobs, that would arise from the desert floor seemingly out of nowhere. These dust clouds, extending as high as 10,000ft, could play havoc with any equipment and reduce visibility to zero.

Captain Buchanan repeatedly asked to brief the raiding parties about what to expect and how to handle the haboobs; he was always denied, but the information would be included in the operational order. On April 17, Buchanan and his small team arrived in Wadi Kena, Egypt along with a meteorological weather van to provide forecasting information for the raid. In the days leading up to the raid, Buchanan's team reported the weather was clear, but warned again they could not predict an emerging haboob (Benson).

General Edward "Shy" Meyer, Chief of Staff of Operations and Plans, through all the planning and briefings, also had a nagging sense that weather issues were being pushed aside. There was no discussion of what to do if the weather turned bad and he felt weather and environmental conditions were just never given the priority by the planners and commanders they should have been (Kitfield, 222).

Final preparations

By April 4, pressure was building on the White House for some sort of military action. "The hawks are flying," Gary Sick, Principal White House Aide for Iran, lamented about the arm-twisting from inside the government

and even from a group of Foreign Service officers who had served in Iran. Their opinion that military force was the best way to ensure most of the hostages would make it out of Iran alive was not well received by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance (Sick, 280–281). On April 7, President Carter finally made the decision to break all diplomatic relations with Iran; expel their diplomats; and embargo goods going to Iran, except for food and medicine, despite the Department of State arguing against all the actions. Carter warned French President Giscard d'Estaing that "only a short time remained before we had to take more forceful steps, including military action." (Carter, 506). After five months of failed negotiations, the decision to launch a military rescue was getting closer and closer in Carter's mind (Carter, 414).

After the April exercises in the southwest US, the decision was made to start moving the forces into theater and aircraft and personnel began to descend upon Wadi Kena, Egypt; Masirah, Oman; Dhahran, Saudi Arabia; and the USS *Nimitz* as secretly as possible. Around the world, mission specific aircraft turned in false flight plans such as showing the Philippines as their destination but ended up in the Middle East; aircraft were quietly removed from command post tracking boards; other aircraft disappeared from large exercises. And a C-141B took off from Andrews AFB, Maryland on April 17 with the RH-53D crewmen, heading to the region and eventually the *Nimitz*.

On April 11, Carter called another meeting of the key principals. Just about everyone agreed that a diplomatic solution was impossible and that it was time to exercise the military option. The President wanted to know the chances of success and likelihood of casualties. Optimistically, he was told that if the mission made it past Desert One, then the mission would succeed, but casualties could be six or eight hostages and rescuers.

On April 16, at the National Military Command Center in the Pentagon, the Joint Chiefs of the US military were briefed on the operation. General Meyer, who had helped shepherd Delta through its formation, believed the mission was being passed off as a "cakewalk" – an assessment that Meyer disagreed with, since the operation was cobbled together with a mix of units and had never conducted full dress rehearsals. Meyer was especially concerned with the confusing chain of command and who would really be in command at the different stages. Doubts remained about the inclusion of the Marine Corps helicopter pilots, with some suspicion that the Marine Corps pushed for them just to get the Marines in the action (Kitfield, 221–222).

That evening, on April 16, President Carter received his final briefing at the White House situation room from General Jones and Colonel Beckwith. The President listened intently and told everyone that there would be no second-guessing of the operation from the White House (Beckwith, 19–21). The President conceded everything was in place and the time was right to rescue the hostages. He let the assembled men know that "I do not want to undertake this option, but we have no other recourse. We're going to do this option." (Zimmerman, 118).

The date was set for April 24.

THE PLAN

On Night One, April 24, three MC-130E Talons, call signs Dragon One through Three, with the rescuers and equipment, and three EC-130Es, call signs Republic Four through Six, laden down with two 3,000-gallon fuel bladders each, would take off from the air base on the island of Masirah off Oman and head towards Iran. The first MC-130E would depart at dusk, one hour ahead of the other two MC-130Es to secure Desert One. After the MC-130Es, the EC-130Es would follow, carrying 18,000 gallons of fuel for the helicopters.

At the same time eight RH-53Ds, call signs Bluebeard One through Eight, would take off from the *Nimitz*, 50 miles south of the Iranian coast. Planners expected at least one helicopter to fail at take-off.

At Desert One, the first MC-130E would disgorge the first wave of Delta and the Ranger road watch team. The Rangers would position themselves along the road between Yazd and Tabas to intercept any Iranian who happened to be driving by. Air Force combat air controllers would prepare the landing zone and guide the other planes and helicopters in.

The second and third MC-130Es would land about an hour later, bringing with them the rest of the rescue force. The EC-130Es would land about six minutes behind the MC-130Es and take up positions to refuel

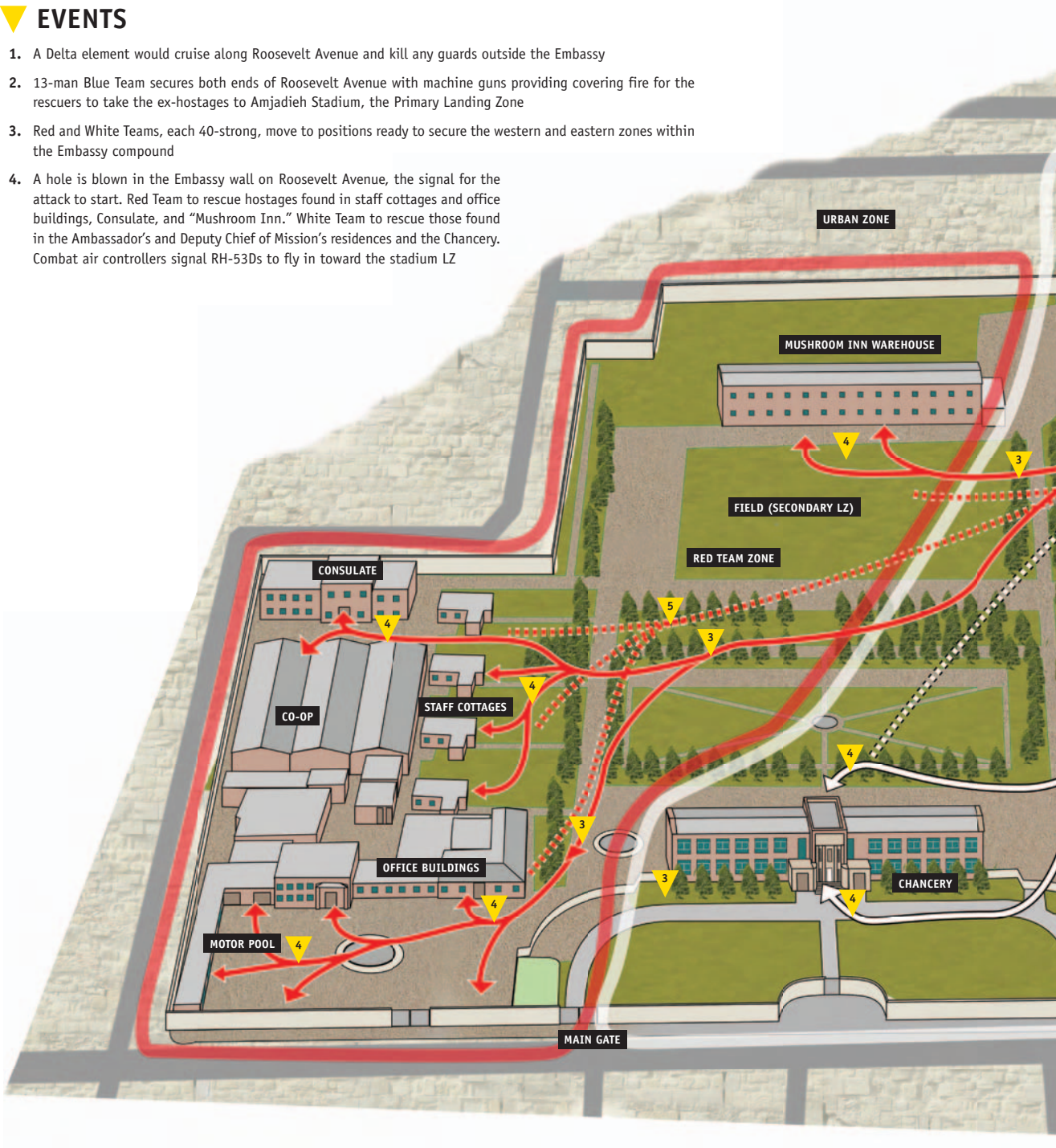
BELOW LEFT
At Wadi Kena, Colonel Beckwith inspects his men once more before they board the C-141 and head to Masirah. It is obvious by the intensity of their expressions they know the mission will launch. Colonel Beckwith's radio operator follows close behind with a PRC-77 radio on his back. (DoD)

BELOW RIGHT
Delta boards a C-141 for the flight to Masirah. The large number of Delta personnel needed for the mission is clear and Beckwith insisted every single man was needed to clear the large embassy compound. The men are carrying 5.56mm CAR-15s and at least one can be seen with a M79 40mm grenade launcher. (DoD)

THE PLANNED RESCUE, US EMBASSY COMPOUND, TEHRAN

EVENTS

1. A Delta element would cruise along Roosevelt Avenue and kill any guards outside the Embassy
2. 13-man Blue Team secures both ends of Roosevelt Avenue with machine guns providing covering fire for the rescuers to take the ex-hostages to Amjadieh Stadium, the Primary Landing Zone
3. Red and White Teams, each 40-strong, move to positions ready to secure the western and eastern zones within the Embassy compound
4. A hole is blown in the Embassy wall on Roosevelt Avenue, the signal for the attack to start. Red Team to rescue hostages found in staff cottages and office buildings, Consulate, and "Mushroom Inn." White Team to rescue those found in the Ambassador's and Deputy Chief of Mission's residences and the Chancery. Combat air controllers signal RH-53Ds to fly in toward the stadium LZ



5. Red and White Teams escort rescued hostages back across the compound to the hole blown in the wall on Roosevelt Avenue
6. The first helicopters – Bluebeard 1 and 2 – land in the stadium awaiting the rescue parties
7. The hostages are led up Roosevelt Avenue to the Amjadieh Stadium, while the Blue Team blocks any Iranian counterattacks

8. Bluebeard 5 and 6 fly south to evacuate three hostages and their Special Forces–Detachment A rescuers at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
9. As the first two helicopters take off with hostages on board, the next pair (3 and 4, then 7 and 8) land in turn to airlift the remaining hostages and rescue teams to Manzaniyah Air Base where C-141s wait to take them to safety

the inbound eight helicopters. The first two MC-130Es, having unloaded the rescuers and equipment, would take off and return to Masirah. Upon returning to Masirah, some of the crews would board a C-141 and head back to Wadi Kena where they would participate in the Night Two phase.

Two of the EC-130Es would take up position on the north side of the road, while the final EC-130E and the remaining MC-130E would be on the south side of the road. The two EC-130Es on the north side would refuel three RH-53Ds each and the southside EC-130E would refuel two RH-53Ds. The RH-53Ds were to then arrive about 15 minutes after the last EC-130Es were in place.

The helicopters would begin refueling while taking on men and equipment. The operation called for at least six helicopters to be able to take off from Desert One after refueling. Anything less than that, and the mission would be called off.

In the early morning of Day Two, or April 25, after refueling and loading Delta, the functioning helicopters would take off in the direction of Tehran while the airplanes returned to Masirah, refueling in the air over the Gulf of Oman. The helicopters would fly another two and half hours to another desert site 60 road miles southeast of Tehran and offload Delta. At this site, Delta would be met by Dick Meadows and guided by foot to their hide site in a ravine to rest for the day, far enough from a road to be out of sight, but close enough for them to easily get their transport into Tehran.

The helicopters would then fly northeast on to their hide location of Desert Two in the valleys and canyons around Garmsar, about 52 miles outside of Tehran, 35°14'00"N 52°15'00"E. By the time the sun came up they would have been camouflaged, the crews in defensive positions, and awaiting nightfall.

At dusk on April 25, Delta's six drivers and six translators would then go with Dick Meadows to a warehouse outside of Tehran to pick up six Mercedes trucks which they would drive back to pick up the rest of Delta in their hide site. The trucks, using false walls built into the cargo beds to hide the assault teams should they be stopped, would take the men to the warehouse. Colonel Beckwith would be taken on a reconnaissance of the route of the embassy and the surrounding area, then return to the warehouse for last-minute adjustments.

Also, at dusk, on April 25, 100 US Army Rangers would depart from Wadi Kena aboard four C-130s, refuel over Saudi Arabia and head to the Iranian airfield of Manzariyeh to seize it for the rescue missions. Four AC-130H gunships, under the call sign Hammer, would also take off from Wadi Kena. One would provide cover fire in Tehran, one was to suppress any attempts by Iranian aircraft to scramble from Mehrabad Airport, and the final AC-130H would provide air support around Manzariyeh, with the fourth gunship acting as a reserve. Two C-141Bs would follow the Rangers into Manzariyeh, with one being a medevac flight capable of providing trauma care for hostages or rescuers and the second to transport the others.

Meanwhile, the 13-man assault team tasked with rescuing three American hostages in the Foreign Ministry Building would travel via a Volkswagen bus to their target building. At 2300hrs, a group of Delta would drive along Roosevelt Avenue and kill any guards with .22-caliber suppressed pistols. The rest of Delta, broken down into Red, White, and Blue Team elements, following the initial screening force, would move into position along the embassy wall.

The 40-man Red Team element, comprising Delta's A Squadron under command of Peter Shoomake, would move to secure the western half of the embassy grounds, freeing any hostages found in the staff cottages, the Mushroom Inn and commissary and killing any guards found in the motor pool and power plant areas.

The 40-man White Team element, comprising Delta's B Squadron and under command of Logan Fitch, would move to take the embassy's eastern side, free any hostages found in the deputy chief of mission's residence, the ambassador's residence, and the chancery. One of the men even had keys to the kitchen entrance brought out by the ambassador's cook when he fled the country.

The 13-man Blue Team, comprising Delta's snipers/observers from the Selection and Training Section under command of Jerry Boykin, would move to secure both ends of Roosevelt Avenue with M60 and HK21 machine guns. They would provide covering fire for the rescuers to take the hostages to Amjadieh soccer stadium next to the embassy, which would be the Primary Landing Zone.

Once Red and White were in position, explosives would blow a hole in the embassy compound wall. The explosion would be the signal to start the assault. Delta would begin storming their assigned buildings, killing any guards they came across and freeing the hostages.

The explosion would also signal Delta's air liaison to call the RH-53Ds, now hovering on the outskirts of Tehran, to move to Amjadieh soccer stadium. Once again, Beckwith was pessimistic all the helicopters would be able to crank up their rotors for the rescue flight. He hoped at least four would make it to Tehran.

At the ambassador's residence, two Delta operators would move to the roof with M72A2 Light Antitank Weapons (LAWs) to provide covering fire. As Red and White elements swept the buildings rescuing the hostages, some would clear the open field in the middle of the embassy compound to create a Secondary Landing Zone. Delta would have the option of either landing zones, or even using both to confuse the Iranians and keep them off balance.

While Red and White Teams headed out of the compound towards the Amjadieh soccer stadium next door, the Blue Team, holding Roosevelt Avenue that ran between the embassy and the stadium, would lay down a withering base of fire if Iranian forces approached. Meanwhile, at the Foreign Ministry Building, the 13-man Special Forces team would rescue the three hostages there and then be picked up by helicopter in an adjacent park.

The Rules of Engagement (ROE) were simple: if possible, they would kill only those guards holding the hostages or threatening the rescuers,

Hours before launch on April 24, the eight helicopters are prepared for the mission on the flight deck of USS *Nimitz*. Now on the flight decks, their tail booms and rotor blades will be moved into position. They are armed only with .50 caliber machine guns mounted in the crew chief's door, behind the cockpit. To survive, the helicopters will rely on surprise and the AC-130s overhead destroying Iranian air defenses between Tehran and Manzariyeh (DoD).

and not be distracted by secondary targets or get engaged in prolonged fights if possible. The condition and state of mind of the hostages was the big question. Would some take matters into their own hands during the assault and fight back against their captors, endangering themselves and the rescuers? Would some try to protect friendly guards from being killed? After months of captivity were they all physically capable of making their way to the rescue helicopters, all the while possibly under fire? Beckwith's men would have orange-yellow arm and headbands to put on the freed hostages to help keep track of them.

Further backing up the covering team were two AC-130H gunships that would be flying over Tehran with predetermined target grids. Iranian Russian-made self-propelled antiaircraft guns were the most dangerous threat, but the AC-130Hs would make short work of them. In keeping with President Carter's desire to avoid civilian casualties, one Delta operator, Major Lewis "Bucky" Burruss, carried one M7 riot-control CS grenade, and if the AC-130Hs had to fire on crowds converging on the embassy, they would do so with 40mm mischmetal rounds, although these were only slightly less lethal with a smaller amount of explosive filler than normal 40mm HE rounds.

As the assault progressed, the helicopters would begin their approach. They would land at the soccer stadium across from the embassy and Roosevelt Avenue. This would provide an easily defensible position and a clear landing zone. If the soccer field was threatened, Delta could defend the embassy and bring in helicopters into the open grounds of the embassy compound. Two other helicopters would proceed to the foreign ministry for the three hostages and 13 rescuers there. Once all the hostages and mission agents were airlifted out, either from the embassy or the soccer stadium, Red, then White, then Blue would climb aboard the helicopters and fly out of Tehran towards Manzariyeh.

Concurrently as the Tehran operation unfolded, C Company of the 1/75th Army Rangers would fly in from Wadi Kena and seize Manzariyeh airfield 35 miles to the south of Tehran. The rescue helicopters would then come into the airfield. Hostages and rescuers would be sorted by their condition into the two C-141Bs. The C-141Bs would then take the hostages, the assault teams, drivers, translators, helicopter pilots and crews, and US government agents out and fly to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia and then onward to Ramstein Airbase in West Germany. The Rangers, on board their MC-130s, would be the last to leave.[1]

1 Various accounts of the plan differ in a few details. Interviews for this book and declassified documents have revised the details further.

THE RAID

Assets move forward

On April 18 the crews of the 1st SOW, the force tasked with the Manzariyeh airfield seizure on Night Two, were told at Hurlburt Field the mission was a "Go" and on April 20, the aircraft began to depart for the Middle East, arriving at Wadi Kena, Egypt on April 22. Here they worked with the Rangers to finalize plans and configurations for the seizure of Manzariyeh (Meller, 24–26).

While the aircraft and personnel were engaged in a worldwide shell game to move into position undetected, Meadows, Arooji, Lahidji, and other American agents prowled the key objectives, double-checking the hiding places and routes to and from the city. The soccer stadium had poles erected on the field that Delta would have to take down with explosives. At the warehouse, the trucks and vans were checked over and false panels installed to hide Delta.

At the same time as men and equipment were arriving and assembling in Wadi Kena and Masirah, the helicopter leg was being prepared. Helicopters 7 and 8, long thought of as "hangar queens," were brought up to operational status. Three days before the mission, they were given a four-hour shakedown flight. Then, on April 22, the helicopters were retired below deck to receive a camouflage paint scheme of desert tan over their dark navy blue scheme. Air filters were removed, additional avionics and navigation aids and fuel tanks installed, and their machine guns prepared.

After the four-hour shakedown flight led by Lieutenant Colonel Ed Seiffert, now the flight commander for the helicopters, bad luck with the helicopters continued. During testing of helicopter avionics in the hangar of the *Nimitz*, the power running to the helicopters failed, and when a technician went to press a button on the ship bulkhead to restore power, he pressed the fire-suppression button instead. This triggered an instant flood of corrosive fire-retardant foam, covering five of the helicopters. The carrier crews scrambled into action

The RH-53Ds are brought up to the flight deck of USS *Nimitz* on April 24, only hours before the launch of the mission. Externally, they have no markings indicating squadrons, nationality, or any other identifying signatures. (DoD)

and cleaned off the helicopters. While an inspection showed no damage had been done, there was no guarantee (Zimmerman, 119).

On April 20, Delta was picked up by two C-141Bs for the flight to Ramstein AFB to collect the Special Forces team tasked with taking down the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Operation *Storm Cloud*, and then flew onward to Wadi Kena, which was the intermediate staging base (Beckwith, 238). While there, Delta test-fired their weapons, prepared the building breaching charges, and the helicopter destruction charges for after the rescue, which were ammunition cans containing M14 TH3 thermite grenades and C-4 explosives (Vining).

Last-minute weapons checks and test-firing the weapons also provided one big surprise. Detachment-A spent a considerable amount of time training with the West German counterterrorist team, the GSG-9, and regularly drew some ammunition stocks from them. Unfortunately, some of the 9mm ammunition given to Detachment-A before the mission was training rounds. When Delta support personnel saw them loading what they thought was live ammunition for the raid, Delta stopped them in their tracks, took them to the makeshift range and showed Detachment-A what they almost went into battle with (Murphy).

The rescuers received additional gear and further Central Intelligence Agency briefings, detailing where the hostages were thought to be held, and composition of the guards and routines. Some of the survival gear issued to Delta and other members of the ground team included a Farsi survival guide with useful phrases such as "Don't move," "Where am I," "We are brothers," or "You Iranians and Moslems are famous for hospitality. For the sake of God, help me. I need your help." Each man also carried thousands in US dollars and Iranian rials, along with fake passports and false visas in case the mission went disastrously wrong and they had to get out of Iran as best they could, possibly on their own.

Code words were double-checked. These ranged from "Fire Brick" for the embassy, "Equality" for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Fig Bar" for the helicopter hide site, "Frog Leg" for the consulate building, and "Grapevine" for the stadium across from the embassy (Lenahan, 132). "Red Barn" was the command center at Wadi Kena and General Vaught was "Foreman." The alternate command site was Masirah under Gast called "Gravel Pit." Beckwith became known as "Eagle" and Kyle became "Woodpecker" (Kyle, 223).

On April 24, at Wadi Kena, Delta makes final preparations. Delta's uniform for the mission is clear: standard combat boots, blue jeans, black knit caps, and a dyed black US Army field jacket. Their jackets have an American flag on the shoulder with tape covering it up. During the assault they would remove the tape to identify themselves for the hostages and for each other. Their hair is longer than a typical soldier's and is meant to provide them with some level of anonymity during operations. They are carrying enough water and supplies to last at least two days in the hostile desert. Delta's preferred handgun, the .45 M1911, is visible in its leather holster. (DoD)

While in Wadi Kena, Delta received the news that an embassy cook had been released and, in an amazing coincidence, had sat next to a CIA officer when he flew out of the country. The cook was able to give valuable information on the location of the hostages, which was passed on to Delta by the CIA. Critically, most of the hostages were supposedly on the first floor of the chancery, while a smaller group of hostages were kept in the Mushroom Inn and the ambassador's residence. There was some speculation that the information had been known for some time and the CIA had delayed passing along the information to protect the real source (Boykin, 125).

Beckwith changed the team's responsibilities slightly, allowing Red Team to concentrate more on the chancery, but he did not want to reduce the size of his rescue force. Beckwith pushed a message back to headquarters that despite the windfall of information he had his doubts: "unless you can show hard intelligence produced by a tested source with continuous access, the entire building will have to be cleared, otherwise we risk missing a hostage in the chancery and might as well not clear it at all."

On April 22, General Vaught called in the AC-130H crews to brief them on the mission, making sure they understood the critical role the AC-130Hs would play in the mission, especially in the coverage of the last phase when the helicopters with the rescued hostages were converging on Manzariyeh.

> Gen Vaught stated that no gunship was to leave the area until his aircraft departed Manzariyeh. He said that if he saw a gunship leaving and he had the means, he would shoot them down. Perhaps a bit of drama on his part, but he made his point. He then said, 'If you do not have sufficient fuel you could land on Manzariyeh, destroy the gunship, and he would give the crew a ride home.' He closed his statement with, 'Don't worry, Jimmy [Carter, the President] will buy you a new airplane.' (Walter, 14).

On April 23 the execution phase of Operation *Rice Bowl* was renamed Operation *Eagle Claw* at the request of a Pentagon planner because *Eagle Claw* would "constitute a stronger image in the aftermath than *Rice Bowl*" (Lenahan, 127).

ABOVE LEFT
An A-6 Intruder and F-4N Phantom II ready to launch on board USS *Coral Sea*. The F-4 is part of VMFA-323 "Death Rattlers"; the A-6 is with Carrier Air Wing 14. Under the Shah, Iran purchased approximately 200 Phantoms. By April 1980, it was unknown how many were still mission-capable. (DoD)

ABOVE RIGHT
F-14 Tomcats on board USS *Nimitz* prepare for combat. In the foreground is an F-14 with the special red and black mission markings on the right wing of the carrier squadron VF-41, the "Black Aces." Behind it is another F-14 of VF-84, the "Jolly Rogers," painted with yellow mission markings on the right wing. During the Shah's build up of the Iranian military, Iran was sold 79 F-14s. Mistaken identity in fighting over Iran was a very real possibility between the US and Iranian F-14s. Even though the Iranian Air Force had suffered purges and defections of its pilots and ground crews during the revolution, it was unclear how big a threat it still was. (DoD)

On April 23, all the C-130s were in place at Masirah. Crews painted the propellers solid black as well as painting over all of the aircraft numbers and bright yellow warning and rescue markings on the aircraft. Finally, the underbellies of the planes were painted black. The aircraft crews posed in front of their planes for photographs to commemorate what would be a momentous event in history (Thigpen, 215). One of the pilots had a worrying premonition and said they were not coming back. When asked to explain, he said he "just had that feeling" (Uttaro, 32).

On board US ships in the Gulf of Oman, all knew something was about to happen after months of waiting. Combat Air Patrols, which had been flying non-stop since the USS *Nimitz* and USS *Coral Sea* arrived on station, were ordered that if they saw H-53 helicopters flying around not to transmit the sightings (Ardaiolo). Days before, all outgoing mail from *Nimitz* and her escort ships was stopped. Health and welfare messages between the crew and family via the Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS) were shut down (Brennan).

Because the Rules of Engagement for supporting the rescue mission required visual identification, special high-visibility markings were applied to US aircraft on board USS *Nimitz* and USS *Coral Sea*. On the *Nimitz*, F-14s from VF-41 "Black Aces" were given broad red bands on the right wing flanked by two narrow black stripes, and VF-84 "Jolly Rogers" were given broad yellow bands on the right wing flanked by two narrow black stripes. On board the *Coral Sea*, F-4N Phantom IIs of VMFA-323 "Death Rattlers" received the red and black pattern on the right wings, and VMFA-531 "Gray Ghosts" aircraft received the yellow and black pattern on the right wings. A-7s and A-6s of Carrier Air Wing 14 on the *Coral Sea* were given red and black markings.

The pilots of the aircraft were briefed earlier on the escalation plans if things went wrong. F-4 Phantoms from the *Coral Sea* would provide cover for A-7 Corsairs from the *Coral Sea* as they bombed Iranian ports. A-6 Intruders would head for Desert One, and then on to what they assumed was a one-way mission for Tehran. The Intruder pilots were even given spare ammunition for their .38 sidearms (Ardaiolo). If the Embassy assault failed and the hostages or rescuers were executed they, and the AC-130 gunships soon to be loitering over Iran, were going to destroy every target they could to avenge America.

Search and Rescue and other support aircraft crews were told to get extra rest and be prepared for anything. The day of the assault, search and rescue helicopters received full loads of ammunition and while few of the crews knew exactly what was about to happen, the increase in activity at the command and control stations was noticeable (Bancroft). The entire region was bristling with, so far undetected, American military activity. Everything was now in place.

Early in the morning on April 24 at Wadi Kena, Colonel Charles Beckwith speaks to his beloved Delta as they prepare for the mission. (DoD)

Execute

Early in the morning of April 24, 1980, Beckwith had his men assemble in an old hangar at Wadi Kena for inspections and final briefings. They intentionally did not look like America's elite counterterrorist force. Many sported long hair and beards and wore blue jeans, khaki or black civilian shirts, regular black combat boots, dyed black field jackets, and black knit hats. On their jackets they sported the American flag, covered by black electrical tape. When the assault commenced, they would take the tape off to reveal the flags.

A typical load for the men going into Iran was a CAR-15 5.56mm rifle and .45-caliber M1911 pistol. They also carried 11 5.56mm magazines, two .45-caliber magazines, bolt cutters, a Kevlar armor vest, canteens, knife, M17A1 protective mask, rations, an escape and evasion kit, and $10,000 divided into American and Iranian currency. Some of the men carried explosive charges, five-gallon water containers, M72A2 LAWs, extra ammunition for the machine guns, and more (Vining).

Colonel Beckwith climbed aboard a wooden platform and told Delta:

> We're launching this operation to bring home 53 Americans and I don't intend to come back until we've got every one of them! We've done all the preparations. We're ready for this mission. I have confidence in every one of you that you'll do your job and do it well. (Boykin, 127)

General Vaught then said a few words and spoke from the Bible's Book of Isaiah: "'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And Isaiah said,

Early in the morning on April 24, Major Jerry Boykin leads the assembled Delta operators in a short prayer in Wadi Kena inside an abandoned Soviet hanger. He recites 1 Samuel 17. (DoD)

'Here I am!'" Vaught then spoke of Delta: "Men, your country's counting on you. You've stepped forward and said, 'Here am I, send me!' God bless you" (Boykin, 127).

Afterwards, Vaught turned the platform over to Major Jerry Boykin who led Delta in prayer, quoting from 1 Samuel 17:

> And David put his hand in his bag, and took thence a stone, and slung it, and smote the Philistine in the forehead, that the stone sunk into his forehead; and he fell on his face to the earth. So, David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone.

Delta's operations officer, Major Lewis H. "Bucky" Burruss then led the men in "God Bless America" and Delta boarded planes to move to their Forward Staging Base in Masirah (Rice, 4). Upon arriving in Masirah, a few hours later, there were final checks with Colonel Kyle and his aircraft meant to ferry them to Desert One, and the men got some refreshments and a little bit of rest. Then, with months of training behind them and the fate of the hostages and America's prestige riding on their shoulders, they walked up the ramps to the aircraft to await the final order.

Beckwith, Kyle, some of the Delta operators, two ex-Iranian generals, the 12-man Ranger roadblock team, six Iranian truck drivers, seven Farsi-speaking American drivers, and the combat controllers boarded the first MC-130E. Beckwith and Colonel Kyle would go in with the lead plane, Dragon 1. The Talon was also loaded with an M151 jeep and machine gun and motorcycles to be used for establishing roadblocks and for the combat controllers to mark the runways.

At 1100hrs Zulu Time[2], on April 24, General Vaught received the final briefing. No Russian spy trawlers or navy ships had been spotted, the routes were clear into Iran, weather looked okay, all equipment and men were ready to go. At 1230hrs Zulu Time, General Vaught transmitted the order to the mission commanders, Beckwith, Kyle, and Pittman: "Execute mission as briefed. We are ready and able. God speed" (Lenehan, 130).

A-7 Corsair IIs of Carrier Air Wing 14 aboard USS *Coral Sea* prepare for combat. The A-7s and A-6s of Carrier Air Wing 14 were given red and black identifying markers. If air combat between Iranian and US forces broke out because of the raid, quick visual identification was critical because of the number of aircraft in the air and the fact that the Iranians were still flying US-manufactured aircraft, bought during the Shah's buildup of the Iranian military. (DoD)

At 1405hrs Zulu Time, the pilot of the lead MC-130E, call sign Dragon 1, revved the engines and sped down the runway. Behind him was Dragon 2 with another 50 Delta soldiers, and finally Dragon 3 with the remaining Delta team and three Marine refueling personnel. Republics 4, 5, 6, the EC-130Es, took off next loaded down with two 3,000-gallon fuel bladders each. With strict radio silence orders, there was almost a collision between Dragon 3 and Republic 6 as they got the take-off sequence mixed up. Republic 6, to avoid a collision, moved off

2 All times are in Zulu Time and based on the log books and transmitted messages.

the runway. Both planes were stopped, and after flight engineers confirmed everything was okay, the take-offs continued.

Dragon 1 was now over an hour ahead of the rest of the aircraft, as planned, and at 1531hrs Zulu Time entered Iranian airspace at only 250ft above the ground. Upon reaching the first plateau, Dragon 1 climbed to 6,000ft and then dipped back down. The airplanes flew through the rest of Iran at between 1,000ft and 3,000ft to prevent detection by Iranian air defenses and enable the planes to conserve fuel. The flight in was tense, but quiet. Time and time again, the men had geared up to launch the mission, and now it was for real. Sitting, lying, and leaning around the plane, the men were crammed in with the equipment and gear and laden down with ammunition, food, and water for at least 48 hours on the ground and possible heavy fighting if anything went wrong. They even carried Redeye man-portable antiaircraft missiles, manned by a two-man detachment from the 82nd Airborne, in case they were attacked by Iranian aircraft (Vining).

So far, the navigation systems appeared to be working, and other than the problems on take-off, the flight was going as planned as the formation crossed into Iran. Word from the aircrew was passed to the men in the cargo hold of the plane, who acknowledged the news with the nonchalant attitude of professionals who knew exactly what they were doing. A few gave thumbs-up or simple nods and others went back to sleep (Fitch).

But something emerged that gave the aircrew pause. A thin, hazy layer enveloped the aircraft, blocking out the moon. The pilot and Colonel Kyle conferred and determined that the cloud was of minimal concern and there was no reason to break radio silence and advise the other aircraft.

Soon, another hazy layer appeared on the horizon about 320 miles into Iran. The haze, this time, was thicker and reduced visibility considerably to less than a mile. The NVGs, dependent on the ambient light of the moon, were not helping. For all the careful briefings and planning, the aircraft crews were not briefed on what to do if the flight ran into bad weather (Uttaro, 29–31). What they were encountering again was a haboob. These thin layers of sand and dust are kicked into the air as a downward draft of cooler air hits the desert floor and blows outward. Haboobs can be up to 10,000ft high with strong winds. Dragon 1 and other airplanes behind them were entering a haboob over 100 miles across. The heat of the desert, the buffeting winds, and the fine sand clogging the atmosphere worried Kyle. This time, Kyle ordered the radio operator to prepare an encrypted message to the other elements of the mission, warning them of the conditions. Unfortunately, the

An F-4N Phantom II of VMFA-323 "Death Rattlers" is hastily painted with the special mission markings of a broad red band and two small black stripes while on board USS *Coral Sea*. (DoD)

An F-14 Tomcat of VF-41 Black Aces. The special mission markings of a broad red band and two smaller black stripes are perfectly visible on the right wing. The Tomcat is prepared for combat with a complement of Sidewinder and Sparrow missiles. (DoD)

tight security restrictions even prevented encryption. Despite having a TACSAT WS-3 Radio for secure communications, operational security still meant each radio transmission had to be encoded. In the blacked-out cargo compartment, the radio operator was unable to accurately create the message and it was never transmitted (Thigpen, 221).

After 30 minutes, the planes burst through the second haboob, now less than an hour from Desert One with clear skies ahead. At five miles out, the combat controllers in Dragon 1 remotely activated the Tactical Air Navigation System (TACANS) and beacons buried on the Twin Otter mission on April 1. They had seemingly made it into Iran undetected. Now it was a question of getting the planes down safely.

Desert One

Dragon 1 made several passes over the landing strip to ascertain the correct position before setting down on the fourth pass. The MC-130E, guided in by instruments, NVGs, and by seat of the pants flying, landed roughly, tearing off a radome under the aircraft, cracking some of the aircraft skin, and scooping up sand (Thigpen, 230). Dragon 1 had come in seemingly without slowing down or reducing prop speed, bouncing the commandos in the fuselage about. It was 1810hrs Zulu Time, and US combat forces were now on the ground in Iran.

Unfortunately, on the aircraft's first pass, its Forward-Looking Infrared Radar (FLIR) picked up a truck coming up the road. The Rangers in the plane were alerted to the truck and prepared to intercept it as soon as they landed.

A fully armed F-4N Phantom II of VMFA-531 "Gray Ghosts" on board USS *Coral Sea*. The special mission markings of a broad yellow band and two thinner black stripes are painted on the right wing. The visible Sidewinder air-to-air missile shows the US was prepared to shoot down any Iranian aircraft interfering with the mission. (DoD)

As soon as Dragon 1 landed and came to a stop, the jeep and motorcycle sped out to give chase, with the Rangers and some of Delta scrambling into action under the command of Delta's intelligence officer, Captain Wade Ishimoto.

A Ranger fired a M72A2 66mm LAW at the truck intending to disable it. Instead, a large fireball erupted, lighting up the night sky when the rocket hit the fuel tank. The driver managed to escape, getting into a second truck that seemingly appeared out of nowhere and fled into the darkness. A Ranger in hot pursuit on the motorcycle gave up the chase before he went too far out into the desert. The men concluded the trucks were likely fuel smugglers who probably thought they were under fire by Iranian security forces and unlikely to report the incident.

Delta prepares to depart Wadi Kena. The amount of gear they needed to sustain themselves at Desert One and Desert Two is evident. The man in the background is carrying a five-gallon water container. (DoD)

Simultaneously, a passenger bus suddenly appeared. Dragon 1 had seemingly landed in the middle of rush hour. "Get down!" the team leader yelled, followed by "Stop that bus!" (Vining). Delta went after the bus, firing a 40mm grenade in front of the bus and then small-arms rounds into the engine block. The bus skidded to a stop. Delta charged in, yelling at the passengers to stay seated. In the bus, Delta now found themselves in possession of 44 civilians. They were nothing more than poor Iranians, mostly old men, women, and children traveling from Yazd to Tabas, who had now accidentally stumbled across the might of the American military.

After unloading the passengers, the bus was pushed 120ft down the road to make sure the landing area was clear. The encounter with the civilians, several now wailing or crying in hysterics at finding themselves right in the middle of a war, was so unexpected that for a moment Delta's chief medical officer, Dr. Carlton Savory, found himself guarding the passengers until the situation could be sorted out (Rice, 5).

While Delta and the Rangers were engaging the vehicles, Carney's combat air controllers also scrambled off the airplane and feverishly worked to prepare for the landing of the rest of the incoming aircraft and helicopters. With a burning truck, a knocked-out bus, and dozens of Iranian civilian prisoners, the mission was forced to call up the chain of command for instructions. Kyle called General Vaught at Wadi Kena, and General Vaught called General Jones at the Pentagon to tell him about the unexpected encounter with the vehicles, and he concluded the mission could continue. "Recommend we proceed. That is a remote area. Saturday night. Unlikely to cause major trouble in time to cause mission difficulty," Vaught told Jones, who consulted with the White House. "Roger," Jones replied, "we concur keep going." The mission was still a go. The passengers would be taken back to Masirah on Dragon 1 and flown back into Iran after the mission.

Savory, relieved of his guard duty on the bus, walked up to Beckwith, motioned to the burning wreckage illuminating the Iranian desert, and cracked, "Well, the helicopters won't have any trouble finding us" (Rice, 5).

In the chaos of shooting at the bus and blowing up the fuel tanker, one of the ex-Iranian generals, brought along to assist the mission, also thought

Colonel Beckwith, on the right in light khaki shirt with hands on his hips, and General Vaught, with his back to the camera in olive green fatigues, go over the mission one more time with his key team leaders at Wadi Kena. Some of their .45 caliber pistols are visible in their holsters. They have trained non-stop for storming the embassy for months and are now just hours away from launching. (DoD)

the mission was under attack and hid his weapon on Dragon 1 instead of preparing to fight back. Beckwith, now believing the general was a coward, berated him and ordered him back to Egypt with the bus passengers. With the pistol somewhere on board Dragon 1, Kyle decided that rather than risk one of the Iranian bus passengers finding it on their way to Masirah, he would move them to Dragon 3.

The other aircraft started to come in and all experienced the same problem of missing the approach on the first try and landing harder than planned, or nearly colliding with the others. As the operators disembarked from the second aircraft, with the blazing fuel truck in the background, Delta's Major Lewis Burruss greeted the new Delta contingent with "Welcome to World War III!" (Boykin, 131). By now the remote desert was beginning to look like a busy airport. Carney's six combat controllers, with great skill, marshaled the planes to their offloading and refueling points.

At the makeshift airport, deep inside Iran, everyone worked furiously, laying out hoses for refueling the helicopters, offloading heavy camouflage nets and gear. Red Barn, the command center at Wadi Kena, contacted the covert agents at Desert Two, who reported back "All groceries are on the shelf," indicating everything was ready for them to proceed. On the ground were Republic 4 and 5 on the north side of the runway roughly facing northeast. On the south side of the road were Republic 6 also roughly facing northeast and Dragon 3 facing southwest. It was 1930hrs Zulu Time and Desert One was ready for the next part of the operation. Kyle radioed back to Red Barn that all aircraft were on the ground, and he was sending Dragon 1 and 2 back to Masirah as planned (Kyle, 277).

The question on everyone's mind was: where were the helicopters? All the refueling hoses were laid out and the gear for the next phase was ready to be

Final preparation of the RH-53Ds on the flight deck of USS *Nimitz* on April 24, 1980. The helicopters will go by the call signs Bluebeard One through Eight. The size of the helicopters, and their single-file formation for take-off, stretch them out nearly the length of USS *Nimitz*'s flight deck. (DoD)

loaded. They were almost an hour behind schedule. With sun-up in Iran at 0130hrs Zulu Time, there was very little time left to refuel the helicopters, load them with gear and men, and move them to their hide site. Were there other locations to land and hide the helicopters short of their original hide site if the sun came up before they made it? The other problem was what the contacts and agents either in Tehran or at the Delta drop-off point and helicopter hide-site should do if Delta did not arrive on time. Meadows and Arooji were at the Delta drop-off location short of Desert Two, waiting, listening to the radio. But something was wrong with the timeline; the radio was quiet (Hoe, 158).

The flight of the helicopters

On board USS *Nimitz*, 58 miles off the southern coast of Iran, at 1330hrs Zulu Time, the helicopter crews received their final mission brief. The weather was supposed to be clear, with a possibility of dust clouds. These were dismissed as only minor irritants. Temperatures were expected to be 85 degrees Fahrenheit, with the air getting cooler as they proceeded north past Desert One. Earlier, the helicopters were brought up to deck and configured for flight. The massive tail booms were folded in place and the rotors positioned. They were an odd sight in their tan camouflage pattern on board a ship normally covered with gray and white aircraft. There was no doubt among the ship's crew where they were headed. Leading them was Marine Lieutenant Colonel Edward Seiffert, who had conducted search and rescue missions in Vietnam in H-53s.

Seiffert would lead them northwest at only 200ft above sea level. The crews always expected to fly at low altitude, but the final altitude was set when, during the briefing, there was a mistaken belief that the Iranian radars and air defenses were working better than expected. The helicopters would cross into Iran about 60 miles west of Chabahar and out of range of known Iranian air defense systems and then continue onward to the rendezvous point at Desert One.

At 1445hrs Zulu Time, the crews boarded their helicopters and began cranking up the engines. Surprisingly, and to the great delight of everyone, the rotors of all eight aircraft, Bluebeard 1 to Bluebeard 8, began to turn and, at 1506hrs Zulu Time, the helicopters lifted off. Seiffert, as flight leader, was piloting the lead helicopter, Bluebeard 1. A Delta radio operator was also onboard. Behind him was Bluebeard 2 with Marine pilot Captain B. J. McGuire; Marine pilot Major Jim Schaefer was behind the stick of Bluebeard 3, followed by Marine pilot Captain Barney Oldfield in Bluebeard 4. Marine Colonel Chuck Pittman, Deputy JTF 1-79 Commander For Helicopter Operations, settled in on Bluebeard 5, piloted by Marine Lieutenant Commander Rodney Davis. Bluebeard 5 also carried a Delta radio operator and was the primary helicopter for the mission at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Next were Bluebeard 6 piloted by Marine pilot Major William Hoff, Bluebeard 7 piloted by Marine Major L. C. Walt, and, finally, Bluebeard 8 piloted by Marine pilot Captain James Linderman. From USS *Nimitz*, the good news was relayed to Washington: "We just got eight helicopters off the deck, sir. They are on their way!"

Delta boards a C-141 at Wadi Kena to move to Masirah on April 24. They are confident they can pull off this complex and daring mission. The man facing the camera has his CAR-15 rifle slung over his shoulder. In 24 hours, they would return, never having made it further than Desert One. (DoD)

Flying in a staggered line formation, they checked their Omega and the Palletized Inertial Navigational System (PINS) to verify their routes and headed towards the Iranian coast. The Omega system, which relied on low frequency radio waves, was susceptible to problems if terrain and weather were not ideal. En route across the ocean, the helicopters saw an MC-130E Talon, part of the group heading to rendezvous at Desert One, pass overhead towards the coast of Iran. This was a sure sign the mission was on schedule and everything was going according to plan, for now. At 1518hrs Zulu Time, the helicopters crossed into Iran, under strict radio silence, and at only 200ft altitude.

Problems with the navigation systems began almost immediately in the twilight, but, as long as there was good visibility, the malfunctions were tolerable. Two hours into the flight, and only 140 miles into Iran, Bluebeard 6 experienced a possible engine problem. A Blade Inspection Method (BIM) warning light came on, indicating to the Marine pilot that there was a leak of pressurized nitrogen in the helicopter blades which could cause a rotor failure and a crash. However, the Navy RH-53D he was flying had a newer system, and the warning light did not indicate an imminent blade failure. Unfortunately, the mixed crews flying the helicopters, who may or may not have flown in RH-53Ds before, did not know that. Confusion over instrument readings was inevitable.

Not aware of what the warning light in the Navy RH-53D really meant, the crew set Bluebeard 6 down in Iranian territory, assuming it would be impossible for the helicopter to continue. Bluebeard 8 dropped from formation to land and investigate. Bluebeard 6 was not just suffering from the BIM light, but was now sunk to its belly in the sand. The crew doubted they could get it back in the air even if they ignored the BIM. The men decided to board Bluebeard 8 soon afterwards and then took off to continue north to Desert One and catch up with the others. They were behind schedule, and one of the pilots exclaimed, "I hope they wait for us!" (Bancroft).

At 1745hrs Zulu Time, some of the helicopters spotted more of the Desert One rendezvous group consisting of four C-130s flying parallel and above them. The helicopter crews again assumed things were going as planned, unaware the advance aircraft were spotting dust storms, because of the strict radio silence.

Further along, the helicopters came across the first desert haboob. The thin dust cloud reduced visibility to between one-quarter and one-third of a mile. Instead of flying in a tight formation with only 100ft between rotors, the crews, out of precaution, began to spread out. Nevertheless, they maintained their speed of about 120 knots and an altitude of 200ft. Despite the trouble with the haboob, the crews managed to get through unscathed and continued onward. Bluebeards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 were within sight of each other as the dust cleared. Bluebeard 8, having stopped to pick up the crew of Bluebeard 6, was at least 15 minutes behind.

Six of the RH-53Ds of Mine Counter Measures Squadron HM-16, still in their original Navy blue paint schemes and markings, fly in formation over USS *Nimitz* in a shakedown flight. The helicopters had been brought to the Indian Ocean aboard USS *Kitty Hawk* and transferred to USS *Nimitz* in January 1979. (DoD)

Less than 50 miles after clearing the first haboob, a second, much larger haboob appeared. This time the cloud was denser and stretched for over a hundred miles. The crews were virtually blinded, even with night vision goggles. Aircrews suffered from vertigo trying to navigate with visibility in yards, if that. The temperatures skyrocketed to over 100 degrees inside the cockpits, further disorienting the crews as they choked on the fine dust.

The helicopters began to disappear from each other's view, despite turning on their red safety lights. The pilot of Bluebeard 1, with no other helicopters in sight other than his wingman, Bluebeard 2, decided to turn around and head back for clear air, land, and figure out what to do next. Seiffert, using a special radio, called the command center to report on the situation and after a short discussion decided to push forward. But because of the strict radio silence, critical information, such as the size of the haboob

Stopping the fuel truck, approx. 1815hrs Zulu/0045hrs Tehran time (overleaf)

Just as the first MC-130E, Dragon 1, comes in for a landing at Desert One, a truck is spotted coming down the road. The men were surprised to see a vehicle on what was supposed to be an isolated road in the vast Dash-e-Kavir desert between Tabas and Yazd. Nevertheless, mission planners had prepared for anything. Just in case the mission did encounter vehicle traffic, the mission included a road watch team consisting of members of C Company 1/75th US Army Rangers and commanded by Delta's Captain Wade Ishimoto.

As soon as Dragon 1 lands, the rear ramp drops open and Captain Ishimoto and Ranger Corporal Robert Rubio race across the desert on motorcycles to take up blocking positions. Captain Ishimoto, wearing blue jeans, a black-dyed field jacket, and a black knit cap, drops into the prone position and opens fire with his CAR-15. With the truck still approaching, Corporal Rubio, wearing the standard US Army uniform of green fatigues, fires an M72 Light Antitank Weapon (LAW) at the engine of the Mercedes truck to demobilize it.

Instead, the 66mm rocket hits the fuel tank and a huge explosion rocks the desert. Despite a fireball engulfing the truck, the driver manages to jump out. To the surprise of the Americans, because they do not have night vision goggles, another truck following close behind skids to a stop and picks up the survivor of the explosion. The second truck turns around and escapes into the darkness.

The assumption by Colonel Beckwith is that the trucks are part of a black-market operation smuggling fuel and it is unlikely they would report stumbling across a military operation to any Iranian authorities. The mission is still a "Go."

Ishimoto would remain frustrated for years at the lack of proper equipment for the operation. "We sent our best soldiers over there, ill-equipped, ill-organized. Absolutely pathetic." (*60 Minutes*, October 23, 2001)

and how long it was taking to fly through, or the location of the rest of the flight, was not relayed back and forth between the helicopters.

The other crews were desperately trying to survive the haboob and could not look around for the others. Bluebeards 1 and 2, assuming the rest of the flight was pushing through the dust cloud, took off and continued through the haboob, hoping they could find their way to Desert One, praying the other helicopters made it through and were converging on their objective. Struggling against the haboob, Bluebeard 2 began experiencing a hydraulic leak, but the crew decided to push on, hoping to fix it later if they survived.

Unfortunately, the flight of the helicopters was deteriorating further. Bluebeard 5, with the JTF Deputy for Helicopter Operations, Colonel Chuck Pittman, on board, began suffering electrical system failures, rendering most of the navigation and flight instruments inoperable. The pilot, fighting against the haboob, tried climbing but the dust cloud still surrounded the aircraft. Unable to see his wingman, and out of communication, he was afraid he would collide with another helicopter or crash into one of the low, rugged mountains. Not wanting to risk a crash and with just enough fuel to make it back to the *Nimitz*, or at least the Gulf of Oman where they could be rescued, Pittman told the pilot to turn back. He assumed the other helicopters were making it through and was unaware that he was only 25 miles from clear air and only 145 miles from Desert One.

Back in Washington the President called a meeting of his advisors. "I got a disturbing call that a couple of our helicopters are down," President Carter said. At the same time, Carter announced Cyrus Vance, long opposed to the operation, was resigning. But with no sign of Iranian military activity and with six helicopters still flying – as far as they knew – the mission could go on.

An Iranian guard at the seized American embassy keeps a watchful eye out for threats. He is armed with a West German Rheinmetall MG-3, a derivative of the infamous MG-42. During the assault, Delta did not expect the Iranians to put up much of a resistance. Months of surveillance and scrutinizing news reports convinced raid planners the guards were not well trained and most who survived the initial assaults would flee rather than resist the raid. (Photo by Henri Bureau/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images)

The rest of the helicopters pressed onward towards Desert One. The navigation systems were not helping. Crews would later say that one system said they were 20 miles to port and the other 30 miles to starboard, so they split the difference and went with that. When the helicopters finally emerged from the storm and approached Desert One over an hour behind schedule, they were scattered, out of formation, and badly shaken.

The men on the ground at Desert One were not just concerned about the helicopters' safety, but also their own. So far from home, they could not shut down the engines and take the chance of them not starting up again, and if Iranian forces discovered them, they needed to get airborne quickly. With the engines running, the longer they waited, the more fuel they burned. It had been 90 minutes since the aircraft had been set up for the refueling. If they did not take off within the hour, they themselves would run out of fuel before they reached the coast. Even if the helicopters emerged that instant, it would take longer than an hour to sort things out, get them refueled, and get the MC-130Es

in the air. Kyle decided that two KC-135 tankers had to be scrambled from Wadi Kena.

Finally, at about 2022hrs Zulu Time, the first helicopter piloted by Major Jim Schaefer, arrived. Flying over the burning tanker truck the Rangers had intercepted earlier, he made out all the planes and came in for a landing. Absolutely exhausted and shaken by the ordeal, he landed hard, damaging his front landing gear.

Beckwith, unaware of the pilots' struggle with the haboob, was furious. Schaefer tried to explain to him what they had just flown through, but Beckwith did not believe how bad the haboobs were because he had not flown through them during his flight in aboard his MC-130E. He nearly blew up when Schaefer told him he doubted his helicopter could press on. Beckwith tried to reassure him the mission could continue, and the worst was behind them, but Beckwith did not understand how badly shaken the crews were.

The men set about refueling the helicopter as two others punched through the night sky and landed, including Bluebeard 2 with its failing hydraulic system. The helicopters were coming in with their lights on, which caught the men on the ground by surprise. The helicopters were supposed to approach in blackout conditions from a specified direction. The Redeye antiaircraft missile team was about to shoot one down when they recognized it as a long-lost friend (Vining).

Delta's Major Logan Fitch told one of the pilots he was glad to see him, but the pilot was stressed. "You don't know what we've been through, Major," he said. Fitch tried to calm him, but the pilot shook his head: "You gotta cancel this thing." Fitch didn't know what to make of that and asked him, "What do you mean? Are you okay?" The pilot could only respond, "I guess so," and said his helicopter was okay, "but you don't know what we've been through" (Fitch).

The abort decision

On the ground, the helicopters moved into position for refueling, each creating its own dust storm and further adding to the noise, wind, and heat that enveloped Desert One as the C-130s kept their engines turning. With the unreliability of helicopters, the engines stayed on rather than risk them not starting up again. The combined swirling clouds of dirt and the roar of engines was wearing down the helicopter pilots, who had been told to expect flat, hard, solid ground. By 2057hrs Zulu Time all but two helicopters were on the ground, and there was still some confusion over what had happened to them. But with six helicopters on the ground, the mission could still continue. The combat controllers delicately, and with great skill, marshaled the helicopters to their refueling positions. Bluebeard 3, 4, and 8 would refuel from Republic 4 on the north side of the road running through Desert One and facing northeast. Bluebeard 1 would refuel from Republic 6, also on the north side of the road, facing northeast. Bluebeards 2 and 7 would refuel from Republic 5 on the south side of the road, facing northeast. Dragon 3 waited on the southside of the road, facing southwest.

The charred remains of Republic 4 and Bluebeard 3 lie at Desert One. One RH-53D is intact. Iranians have arrived and the site is being exploited for intelligence and propaganda purposes to show the impotency of America. Beckwith was furious with the crews and his men for their failure to destroy the abandoned helicopters in the hurried escape out of Iran. A request to destroy them with carrier aircraft was denied out of fear of harming Iranians. As a result, a treasure trove of documents, some so sensitive they should not have been brought along, were found by the Iranians. (Public domain)

With ten aircraft on the ground, the scene was a nightmare of heat, deafening noise, blowing sand, a burning fuel truck, darkness, and men scurrying about completing the refueling and transferring of the equipment and men. In the chaos, there did not appear to be a command center established at Desert One, and with nobody wearing normal uniforms or rank, if they could even be seen through the blowing dirt, it was tough to determine who was really in charge. Four commanders on the ground, without a clearly established chain of command, were moving back and forth between the men and machines. Colonel Charlie Beckwith, with Delta, Colonel James Kyle, commanding the air component, Lieutenant Colonel Bob Brenci in charge of the MC-130Es and EC-130Es, and Lieutenant Colonel Ed Seiffert, leading his helicopter crews, all looked like they oversaw entirely different missions (Carney, 93).

Kyle called back to the command center in Wadi Kena to find out if any other helicopters were inbound. Negative, came the response, all helicopters were on the ground. Even with two missing, the plan could proceed, and, with any luck, they would make it to the hide-site before dawn.

One of the pilots also told Beckwith they should consider calling off the mission – the pilot was not sure they were going to make it (Bowden, 451). The comment floored Beckwith. A moment before Beckwith, and his men, were excited, with the helicopters finally landing, and swung into action with enthusiasm, eager to get going to the next phase. Beckwith could not comprehend what he was being told. But the helicopter pilots were seriously shaken up and tried to explain what they had just been through. Beckwith's doubts about the reliability of the helicopter pilots entered his mind again (Beckwith, 253). Another Delta operator clearly saw the pilots were exhausted and beaten down, and wondered whether they had lost their will to continue after whatever they had encountered on the flight in (Vining).

But Beckwith pushed the doubts from his mind. He had six helicopters and that was what he needed. The mission could continue. He knew at least one would fail to take off for the assault on the embassy, but at least at Desert One, he had enough to proceed. The mission was still a go. This is what they had trained for and they were going forward.

Until, that is, the rotor stopped on Bluebeard 2, piloted by B. J. McGuire. The helicopter crew had inspected the failing engine and found the backup pump for the flight controls burned out. Beckwith realized what was happening and angrily confronted Seiffert, in command of the helicopters. The crew insisted the helicopter could not continue. But where the pilots saw engine problems forcing the helicopter out of action, Beckwith saw cowardice. The helicopter crews had lost the will to continue, Beckwith had no doubt. They were failing his beloved Delta, the hostages in Tehran, and the United States (Beckwith, 251–253).

Beckwith found Kyle and told him to talk to Seiffert. Kyle reported back that the pilot said the helicopter was a no-go and Beckwith exploded at Kyle, but Kyle held his ground. Kyle would not override the pilot's decision. The pilot knew the condition of the helicopter and Kyle was not a helicopter pilot. With the backup hydraulic system gone, the helicopter was unsafe and could not go on without a high probability of the helicopter crashing (Kyle, 288). Beckwith wanted to order the pilots to continue, but Kyle oversaw the air component at Desert One.

If this helicopter was out, then the rescue mission was down to five helicopters. Beckwith, from the beginning, had insisted that six helicopters had to depart from Desert One in order for the mission to continue. It was 2120hrs Zulu Time.

General Vaught, under call sign Foreman, was in communication with Washington from his headquarters at Red Barn in Wadi Kena, trying to relay information from Desert One to General Jones.[3] "This is Foreman. We only have five good birds now. They are all refueled. However, helicopter leader recommends we abort and return to base. We could continue at great risk. Request your advice."

General Jones, half a world away, could not believe what he was hearing. "Get me the President and Secretary Brown right away!" Jones called out. "I've got to speak to him… Do you have any word on the sixth bird?" It was 2135hrs Zulu Time and Colonel Kyle and Colonel Beckwith wanted to abort the mission. Colonel Beckwith did not expect any push back.

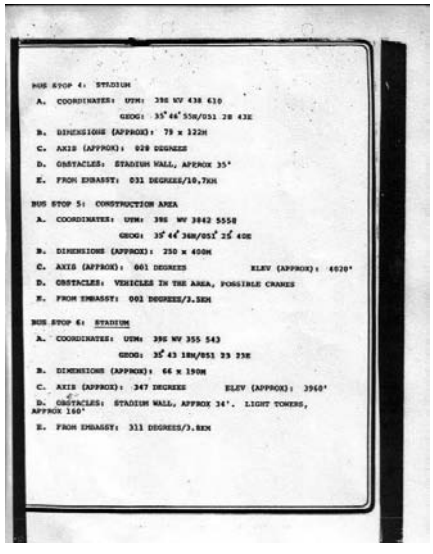
But with so much riding on the mission, Brzezinski and Carter wanted to know if the mission could press forward with only five helicopters. Could Delta cut back on the size of the rescue force? Communication with Beckwith and Kyle went back and forth for several minutes. Several times Washington wanted to know exactly what was going on, seemingly unwilling to believe there were only five helicopters capable of continuing.

Beckwith fumed that there was any debate at all. As far back as January, Beckwith had made it clear to General Vaught that the mission could

3 Radio communication are verbatim transcripts from the recordings of the raid.

RIGHT
Among the many documents left behind as the mission was forced to abandon Desert One were a notebook from one of the helicopter pilots. These were widely circulated in Iran as part of their propaganda to exploit the failure of the Americans. On this page, the descriptions of the different emergency landing zones, "Bus Stops," in and around Tehran are detailed. These included two stadiums and a construction site. If any member of the rescue operation became separated or if a helicopter had to land because of problems, they would work their way to the different "Bus Stops." (DoD)

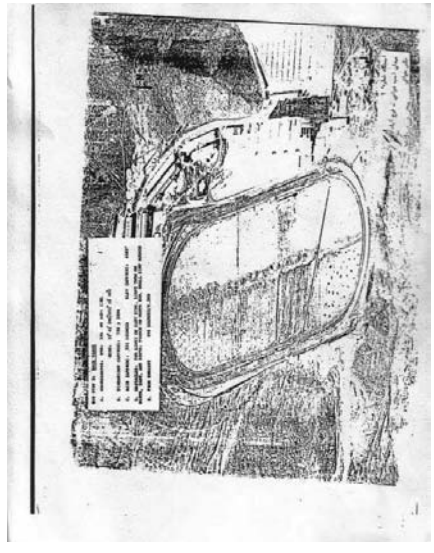
FAR RIGHT
The emergency "Bus Stops" were carefully mapped and detailed so they could be found easily. This was "Bus Stop 2," a racetrack. (DoD)



BUS STOP 4: STADIUM
A. COORDINATES: UTM: 39S WV 438 610
GEOG: 35° 46' 55N/051 28 43E
B. DIMENSIONS (APPROX): 79 x 122M
C. AXIS (APPROX): 029 DEGREES
D. OBSTACLES: STADIUM WALL, APPROX 35'
E. FROM EMBASSY: 031 DEGREES/10.7KM

BUS STOP 5: CONSTRUCTION AREA
A. COORDINATES: UTM: 39S WV 3042 5558
GEOG: 35° 44' 36N/051° 25' 40E
B. DIMENSIONS (APPROX): 250 x 400M
C. AXIS (APPROX): 001 DEGREES ELEV (APPROX): 4020'
D. OBSTACLES: VEHICLES IN THE AREA, POSSIBLE CRANES
E. FROM EMBASSY: 002 DEGREES/3.5KM

BUS STOP 6: STADIUM
A. COORDINATES: UTM: 39S WV 355 543
GEOG: 35° 43 18N/051 23 25E
B. DIMENSIONS (APPROX): 66 x 190M
C. AXIS (APPROX): 347 DEGREES ELEV (APPROX): 3940'
D. OBSTACLES: STADIUM WALL, APPROX 34'. LIGHT TOWERS, APPROX 160'
E. FROM EMBASSY: 311 DEGREES/3.8KM



not proceed past Desert One with fewer than six helicopters. "No way!" Beckwith yelled. They needed everyone. If they proceeded with five, 20 men would have to be left behind, jeopardizing the raid. And given the notorious unreliability of helicopters, especially on a cold start at their hide site, it was highly likely that at least one or two would not crank up in the evening for the assault in Tehran.

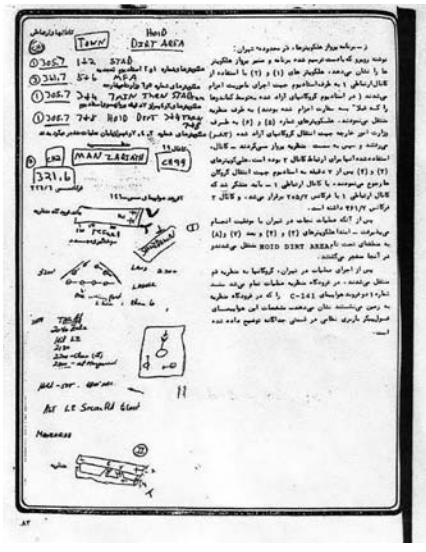
Beckwith made up his mind. The minimum number of helicopters leaving Desert One was always supposed to be six. Beckwith yelled above the roar of engines and howling wind to Kyle relaying the question from the White House, "Ain't no way, Jim. No way! You tell me which one of those 130s you want me to load up. Delta's going home" (Beckwith, 254).

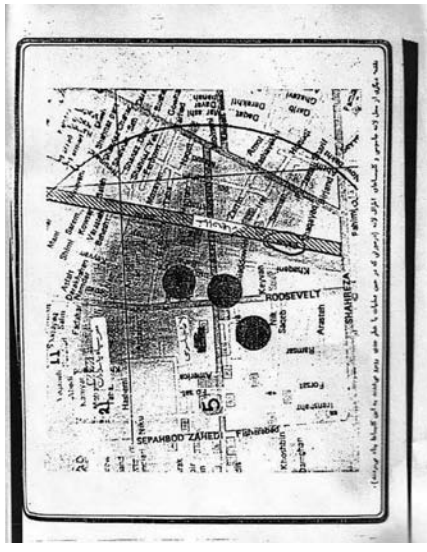
Finally, at 2202hrs Zulu Time, General Jones reluctantly told Vaught, "We concur with your decision to abort."

Disaster

Back in Washington, the President told his advisors that after consultations with Beckwith on the ground, he allowed the commanders to make the decision because he was not going to be seen as making tactical decisions from the Oval Office. Neither he nor General Jones, despite having the legal authority to order Beckwith to continue, would order Beckwith to do so. Beckwith would later say that if he had been ordered to go, he would have feigned poor communication and ignored the order. The advisors were in disbelief. So many helicopters failing was astonishing. Carter lamented, "At least there were no American casualties and no innocent Iranians hurt." (Bowden, 222).

Having never practiced for a mission abort at this stage, a hasty plan called for the helicopters to finish refueling and fly back to the *Nimitz*. The rescue force would reboard the planes and fly back to Masirah. Any abandoned equipment would be destroyed, with fake Soviet documents and equipment thrown in to make it look like it was a Russian accident to keep





FAR LEFT
This pilot note page has some of the most critical information for the operation. It details the sequence of events for the helicopter approach to the embassy compound and stadium and then the flight to Manzariyeh, where Rangers would have seized an airfield from which to fly the hostages out. The American handwriting is on the left and the Iranian interpretation on the right. According to the notes, if everything had gone as planned:
1. Bluebeard 1 and 2 would be the first to land at the stadium next to the embassy.
2. Bluebeard 5 and 6 would land at a clearing next to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to pick up those three hostages and the Special Forces Team.
3. Bluebeard 3 and 4 would laager for 7 minutes and then land in the stadium as Bluebeard 1 and 2 took off.
4. Bluebeard 7 and 8 would then go into the stadium as Bluebeard 3 and 4 took off.
5. The rest of the notes show the landing approaches to Manzariyeh. (DoD)

LEFT
This page shows the immediate area around the embassy compound, including the soccer stadium where Delta would take the hostages for boarding the incoming helicopters. (DoD)

the Iranians guessing what happened. The captured bus passengers would be taken to Egypt and released later. If they got lucky, the mishap at Desert One would go undetected for a couple of days at least, to allow for a new mission to be planned. Heartbroken, the rescuers and air crews set to work to fly back to Masirah. Some of the men picked up some rocks as mementos of their time in Iran (Fitch).

At the hide site, Meadows and Arooji received a coded satellite radio transmission. "We can't get the antenna part to you because we had a lot of trucks break down. We're going to go ahead and cancel the contract" (Bowden, 458). Meadows and his men were left on their own for now. In Tehran, Lahidji got a call from one of his contacts telling him "there's been a serious problem. The guests aren't coming."

Delta moved to board the remaining EC-130Es. On board, Republic 4, Delta operator Staff Sergeant Mike Vining sat down on a partially filled fuel bladder in the middle of the plane. It was hot, the men were tired, and they had a long flight out of Iran. Some of the men took off their gear, body armor and field jackets to get comfortable. Some of the men began to try to get some sleep (Vining).

Major Schaefer's helicopter, Bluebeard 3, was ready to head back to the *Nimitz*, but the EC-130Es needed to go first. Bluebeard 3 and Bluebeard 4 behind Republic 4, piloted by Captain Harold L. Lewis, Jr, needed to get out of the way while Republic 4, lowest on fuel, turned around for takeoff. Bluebeard 3 would move to the left first but with nose gear problems could not taxi, and had to leapfrog over Republic 4. The helicopter rose to about 14ft, kicking up even more dust. At 2222hrs Zulu Time, the crew of the helicopter could only barely make out the ground controller and hoped they were out of the way.

Hope was not enough. The pilot, in the swirling dirt, noise, wind and darkness, either misread the combat controller signals or was disoriented. The combat controller was also rattled by the elements and may not have

moved his control lights properly, signaling Schaeffer to move the wrong way. In any case, Schaefer's helicopter began to drift without having cleared the height of the EC-130E's towering tail fin. The rotors of the helicopter slashed into the EC-130E. Delta Operator Staff Sergeant Mike R. Vining recalls:

> Then "bang" I heard a noise from the front port side. The helicopter first hit our vertical stabilizer, then the propellers of engine number 1 and 2, and came to rest adjacent to the cockpit on the left side, with helicopter's cockpit sitting on top of the EC-130E. To those watching, we had completely disappeared in a fireball. Flames reached 300ft and more into the air. The helicopter's internal auxiliary tank ruptured and had ignited. I looked towards the cockpit and saw flames near the upper part of the cockpit (the helicopter blade tore through the top of the aircraft). The left front galley door blew in. In an instant the cockpit was filled with flames and flames were shooting along the ceiling. The force of the fireball forced the galley door down onto the flight deck. Chris Abel stood up and said, "Haul ass" and then fell down. The aircraft had 33 of our team members on it with an aircraft crew of eight. I saw what appeared to be a person moving around in the cockpit area. This area was full of flames. I looked to the rear and saw people were trying to open the port rear paratrooper door. Sergeant James W. McClain Jr., the loadmaster, opened the port rear paratrooper door, but there was nothing but flames coming in, so he closed it with the help of Major Logan B. Fitch, the White Element commander and the commander of B Squadron. I thought, "Oh, God, is it going to end like this." Major Fitch ordered the loadmaster to open the ramp, but the ramp area was also in flames.
>
> After several attempts the rear starboard door was open. It became crowded with people. Airman First Class Hyram L. Walton went through the door and was knocked down by other people, so he rolled under the aircraft. When the rear starboard door was opened the flames inside increased (due to the draft it created). Flames were spreading from the ceiling and down the sides of the interior. I thought about getting my weapon and equipment. People were moving rearward and the fire was increasing. Technical Sergeant Kenneth L. "Ken" Bancroft helped a man who had been knocked down in the rush for the door. So there wasn't time to grab any of my equipment or my weapon. I could hear someone (probably Sergeant Major Chaney) yell "Don't panic!" – this was repeated by other people and it seemed to work. I moved directly to the open door and I was close to being the last one out. Fitch and Chaney had figured that not everyone would make it and it was time for them to get out. When I went out, I dove out headfirst.
>
> There was nothing but a wall of flames in the doorway. The propellers were still turning at full throttle – this fed the fire and caused an envelope of flames to surround the aircraft's fuselage, and hot metal was flying through the air. I fell six feet to the ground and rolled, my hand hit a piece of metal and it burned my fingers. I saw people's feet going by me. I got to my feet and I could hear the sound of small arms cooking off inside the aircraft. I ran and I could hear explosions coming from inside of the aircraft from the 40mm HE, M67 fragmentation grenades, and M72 LAWs. I didn't know what to do. Staff Sergeant Joseph J. "Joe" Byers III, a radio operator behind the cockpit of the EC-130E and the third pilot were the only two from the flight deck to escape. They escaped down the flight of stairs from the cockpit, crawling across the fuel bladder on hands and knees. They made it to the door and jumped out.

"Escape and evasion" aids, giving useful words and phrases in case Delta operatives had to make their way out of Iran unaided. (DoD)

Thirty-eight personnel escaped the crash: two Marine pilots, three Airmen, and 33 from Delta. I saw one of the Redeye missiles we had onboard shoot through the aircraft's nose and fly out into the desert. The fuel bladder finally ignited and a huge pillar of flame shot skyward in a loud explosion that buckled the aircraft. I saw people going to another EC-130E (#5), so I went too. The people on the aircraft were waving us away (I guess they were full). Later I learned they were trying to get away from the inferno. I ran to another EC-130E (#6), which was parked next to our exploding EC-130E (Vining).

Inside the helicopter, Schaefer had been knocked out and when he came to, his cockpit was in flames. His copilot had managed to escape, but the other crew members died in agony. Major Schaefer heard his crew chief scream from behind. Despite Schaefer trying to pull him to safety, his crew chief was engulfed in flames. Schaefer was forced to give up and climb out the cockpit window, from where he fell to the ground.

At first, many of the men around Desert One thought they were under attack from Iranian forces, grabbed their weapons and scrambled for

Disaster at Desert One, approx. 2222hrs Zulu/0252hrs Tehran time (overleaf)

Down to only five helicopters, Colonel Beckwith decides to abort the mission. Beckwith has said all along that if the mission dropped to less than six helicopters at Desert One, the mission would be scrubbed. With Bluebeard 2 broken down, Bluebeard 5 nowhere to be seen, and Bluebeard 6 abandoned early in the flight to Desert One, the mission cannot go forward.

The surviving helicopters and planes will fly out after the helicopters refuel. Bluebeard 3 needs to move over to clear space for Republic 4, loaded down with men from Delta, to take off. In the wind, noise, heat, and blinding dust, Bluebeard 3 lifts off the ground. The RH-53D, despite the best efforts of the combat air controllers, collides with Republic 4 right behind the flight deck.

A huge fireball erupts in the desert as the helicopter and plane burst into flames. Tragically, eight among the crew of the EC-130E and RH-53D die in the ensuing calamity. Miraculously, all the Delta operators and several crew survive the fireball, scrambling out of the burning wreckage.

In this illustration, Delta and the Rangers react to the collision as Bluebeard 3 smashes into Republic 4. Delta is wearing blue jeans, black field jackets, black knit caps, and carrying CAR-15s. They are wearing standard US Army LBE and are sporting covered-up American flags on their field jackets. Delta, to blend in easier with the civilian population, have longer hair and some have beards. The Rangers are wearing the standard US Army uniform and carrying CAR-15s. Visible in the background is part of the road watch team, equipped with a M151 MUTT jeep and motorcycle.

defensive positions as they ran clear of the exploding aircraft. But once it was clear what was going on, they concentrated on rescuing the crew members and accounting for each other. Technical Sergeant Randy Gingrich, on board Republic 6, ran over to Major Schaefer and carried him into Republic 6. Schaefer's copilot was carried into the same aircraft along with the Republic 4 loadmaster, who had been blown out of the plane. His flight suit was on fire and his back injured.

On board Republic 6, Major Schaefer was placed on the fuel bladder, but instead of providing relief, this caused more pain as the fuel sloshed about every time someone climbed around it. Major Schaefer had burns to his face and other injuries. He was made as comfortable as possible, given water and morphine, and kept lucid (Vining).

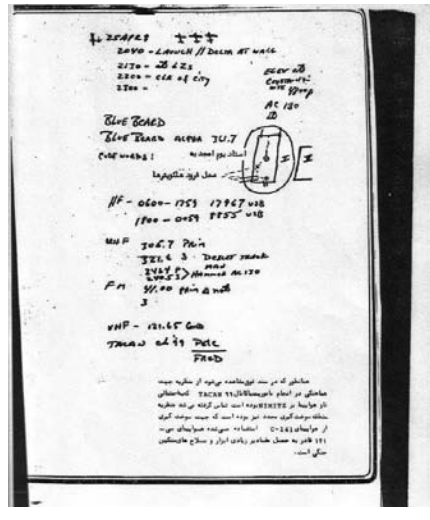
Some of the men were ordered to abandon the rescue effort as the flames and ammo cooking off made it too dangerous to continue. Under duress, they stepped back and headed for the aircraft to take them out. Beckwith climbed aboard one of the planes and radioed Wadi Kena about the disaster. The decision was made to hastily abandon the helicopters and get everyone out.

General Vaught relayed the tragic news back to General Jones:

> There has been an accident at the desert tracks. Initial reports indicate helicopter has run into a C-130. The C-130 is on fire. Do not have the details but believe people are getting out all right. We still have the capability to extract and are doing so.

The Farsi speakers told the terrified bus passengers to get on the bus and remain there until morning or they would be picked off by snipers.

President Carter took a call from General Jones, expecting an update on the evacuation. He was already shaken up by the need to abort the mission, but now the blood drained from his face and a look of horror came over him. When he asked, "Are there any dead?" everyone in the room knew disaster had struck.



RIGHT
This typewritten captured page, with Iranian translations on the right, lists the different brevity or code words for different components. Depending on the phase and mission component, some of the code words changed. This compromise, along with other documents, revealed the full extent and complexity of the operation to the Iranians and other hostile powers who read it. This included the identification of America's newest commando force and infiltrators inside Iran, "SFOD-Delta: Bowshot" and "Delta Reception Party: Esquire." (DoD)

FAR RIGHT
This helicopter crew notepad identified the precise timing of the raid on the embassy compound if everything had gone according to plan. According to the notes:
1. Delta was expected to be at the embassy wall at 2040hrs Zulu April 25 (0030hrs April 26 Tehran).
2. The helicopters would launch from their hide site at Desert Two at 2040hrs Zulu April 25 (0030hrs April 26 Tehran).
3. At 2130hrs Zulu April 25 (0130hrs April 26 Tehran) the helicopters would be at the LZs at the embassy and a clear area near the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
4. By 2200hrs Zulu April 25 (0200hrs April 26 Tehran), the helicopters with the rescued hostages and rescue personnel would be clear of the city.
5. The other notes illustrate the approach into the soccer stadium next to the embassy. (DoD)

When the collision occurred, the helicopters were quickly abandoned, but none of the crews destroyed their helicopters and many items of critical intelligence were left behind, including call signs, the flight plans, radio frequencies, and contact information for the agents inside Tehran. While there was plenty of time to destroy the helicopters with the embassy breaching charges and the M72A2 LAWs, the exploding ammunition and fuel and the confusion prevented the men from doing so.

Evacuation

The air combat controllers picked up the remote active landing lights and TACANs and laid out fluorescent chemical light sticks. This sudden change nearly caused two of the aircraft to drift off the hard dirt of the landing zone and bog down because the light sticks were hardly visible. The first aircraft to take off was Republic 5 at 2245hrs Zulu Time. The pilot gunned the engines for 3,000ft, but just before it lifted off, Republic 5 hit the ditch of the dirt road. Despite a violent shudder, the pilot managed to get airborne and, after a struggle, steady it out and gain speed and altitude (Thigpen, 228). The other aircraft lined up with the wheel ruts of Republic 5 and followed them down and into the air. Another of the planes, over-laden with extra fuel, gear, and men, struggled to reach takeoff speed, and as the ditch approached, the crew was afraid it would shear off the nose gear and the plane would plow into the sand to a stop. At full throttle, the plane hit the ditch and violently bounced into the air, still not quite at official take-off speed, but with enough lift that the pilot was able to nurse it along, gaining altitude and speed (Johnson).

Even though there was supposed to be a full headcount before takeoff, some of the rescue party were caught off-guard by the planes' movement. One Special Forces Detachment-A member, part of *Storm Cloud*, saw one of the planes possibly getting ready to take off without all the men aboard. He grabbed his weapon and raced to the front of the plane to make sure it wasn't going anywhere, ready "to shoot those motherf***ers," rather than be left behind (Murphy).

Captain Ishimoto and another Ranger, guarding the road some way from the chaos, raced back on the motorcycle as the planes began to taxi down the makeshift airstrip. Dr. Savory and Major Jesse Johnson were in a jeep, undertaking a quick search for team members, when they spotted Ishimoto and his buddy, who dropped their motorbikes, piled into the jeep and made it back to the aircraft just in time.

Once on board, the men cobbled together a list of names to give to the crew chief to begin the headcount. Nobody was on the plane they were supposed to be on, with the rescue force lucky to just get on any aircraft. Dr. Savory's medical team, amazed there were not more killed or wounded, had to operate on only one man, Air Force Staff Sergeant Joseph J. J. Beyers, the radio operator of Republic 4, whose hands were badly burned. Colonel Beckwith had initially told a doctor that Beyers was too injured to be saved. The doctor ignored Beckwith, and Beyers would eventually be medevaced, along with the other wounded, to Ramstein Air Force Base in West Germany (Utarro, 33).

DISASTER AT DESERT ONE

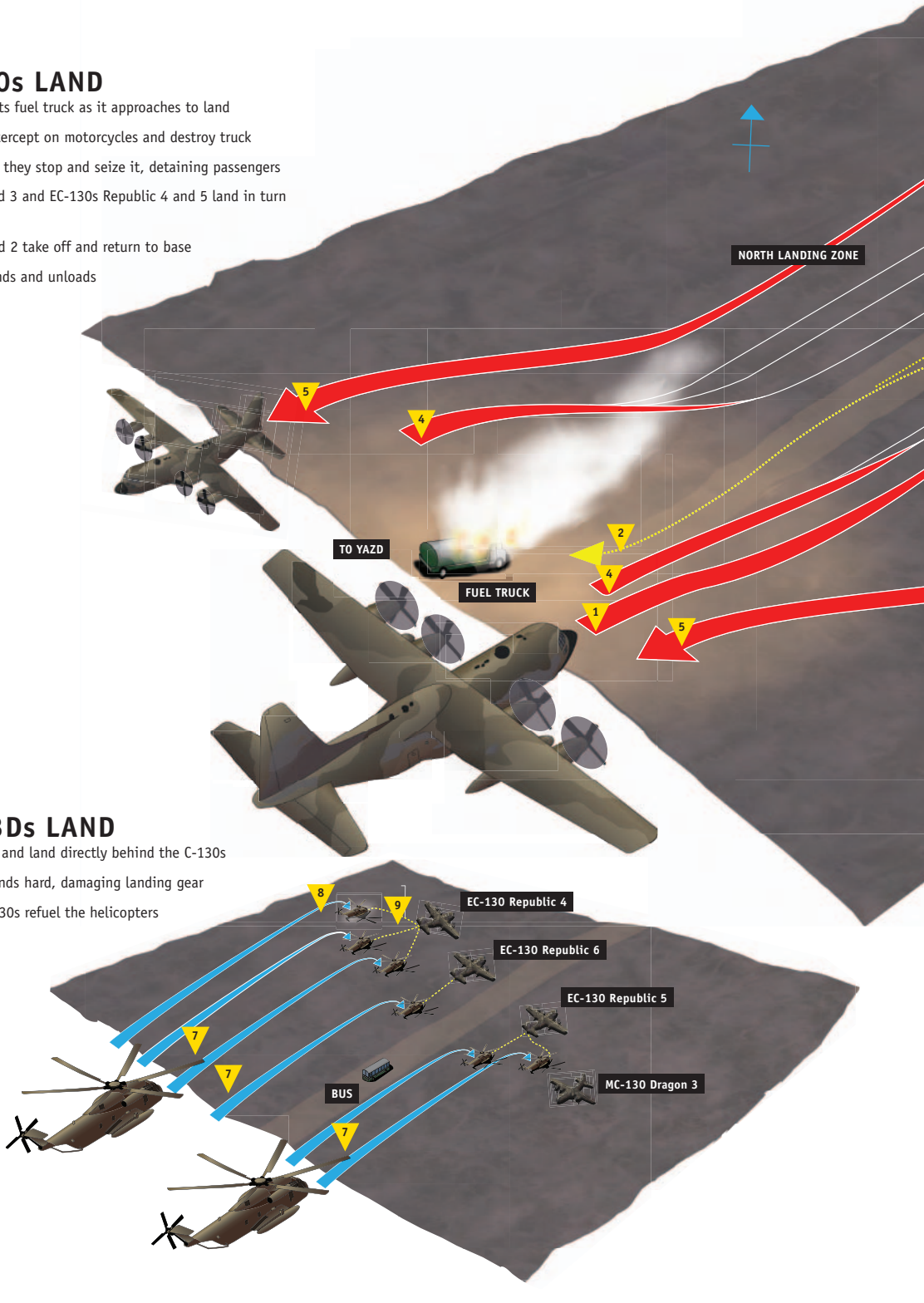
EVENTS

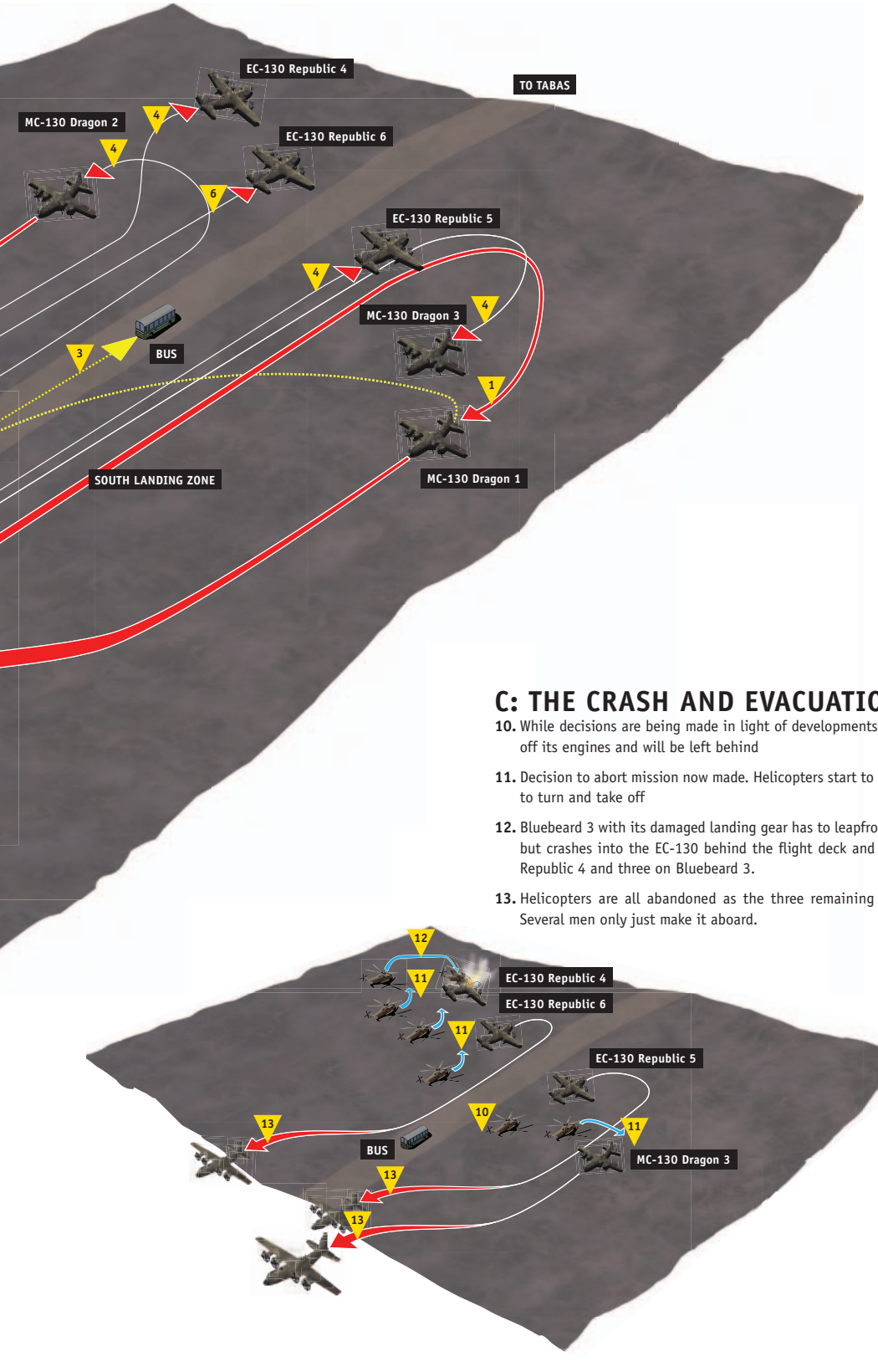
A: THE C-130s LAND

1. MC-130 Dragon 1 spots fuel truck as it approaches to land
2. Rangers and Delta intercept on motorcycles and destroy truck
3. Seeing bus approach, they stop and seize it, detaining passengers
4. MC-130s Dragon 2 and 3 and EC-130s Republic 4 and 5 land in turn and unload
5. MC-130s Dragon 1 and 2 take off and return to base
6. EC-130 Republic 6 lands and unloads

B: THE RH-53Ds LAND

7. The RH-53Ds approach and land directly behind the C-130s
8. RH-53D Bluebeard 3 lands hard, damaging landing gear
9. Fuel lines from the C-130s refuel the helicopters





C: THE CRASH AND EVACUATION

10. While decisions are being made in light of developments, Bluebeard 2 has to shut off its engines and will be left behind

11. Decision to abort mission now made. Helicopters start to maneuver to allow C-130s to turn and take off

12. Bluebeard 3 with its damaged landing gear has to leapfrog over EC-130 Republic 4, but crashes into the EC-130 behind the flight deck and explodes. Five deaths on Republic 4 and three on Bluebeard 3.

13. Helicopters are all abandoned as the three remaining C-130s turn for takeoff. Several men only just make it aboard.

Iranian soldiers show off the Iranian rials and American dollars left behind at Desert One during the hurried evacuation from Desert One. Planning for every contingency, the rescuers all carried Iranian and US currency to bribe their way out of trouble if they were forced to escape on foot. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

As they took off, air support from the *Nimitz* was called in to bomb the helicopters that the men had been unable to destroy. However, General Vaught's staff recommended standing down the strike package because it was still unknown if all the Americans had made it out, and there was a fear of injuring or killing the bus passengers. Carter told General Jones his intention was to minimize the unfolding catastrophe and to avoid casualties among the Iranians: "Let's not do it, because if there are numbers of Iranians all over those helicopters looking at them as a curiosity … you know we're going to end up with a bunch of casualties."

As word of the disaster reached Masirah and Wadi Kena, two C-141Bs at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia were sent to Masirah under an emergency medical alert and a C-9 Nightingale from Germany headed to Wadi Kena with a burns team onboard.

Further complicating matters, there was still confusion as to whether all of the helicopter crews were accounted for. There was uncertainty as to which helicopter had gone down en route to Desert One and if any crews were missing in the desert. But President Carter did not want to risk escalating the situation. "Now David," he told General Jones, "One thing we don't want to do is compound the problem by having a major pitched battle over Iran." Search and rescue crews, ready to launch in their CH-46 helicopters, stood down (Brennan).

Out at sea, at about 0030hrs Zulu time, on board USS *Coral Sea* the General Quarters klaxon went off. This time, there was no "This is a drill" follow up. It was for real and the ready alert aircrews scrambled for the flight deck. As the sun came up, the pilots were in their cockpits, on a hair-trigger, ready to launch. The jets were fully loaded and armed and the carrier desk was swarming with personnel preparing for war (Ardaiolo). Throughout the *Coral Sea* and *Nimitz* carrier groups, "Set Condition Zebra throughout the ship! Man your battle stations!" blared from the speakers (Bancroft).

Admiral Robert Long, wary of Iranian forces catching his forces off guard, sent a message to all American naval forces in the region: "… an incident not specified has occurred that could lead to hostile action by Iranian forces."

With no Iranians yet detected moving to intercept the rescue force, commanders decided that the post-raid Rules of Engagement were unwarranted. Admiral Robert Long informed General Jones:

> …as of now we see no reason to believe the Iranian government is aware of the mission, therefore see no reason to unnecessarily invoke the post-strike rules of engagement …

> if you get positive indications that Iranian forces are aware of evacuation attempt then you are authorized to invoke the post-strike ROE…

Long hoped to avoid a clash with the Iranians. "I'm very sensitive to avoid any incident with the Iranians but at the same time we certainly don't want to lose, say, a destroyer going through the Straits of Hormuz."

The C-130s limped back across Iran, over the Gulf and on to Masirah Island. Republic 5 suffered an engine malfunction and continued with only three engines. Inside Republic 6, the passengers were told that the landing gear was probably damaged, and, with fuel low, they might have to ditch the plane at sea. At the same time, the men did the best they could do to take care of the wounded, providing water to drink and cool their burns while making the ride as comfortable as possible (Vining). Major Fitch, sitting in the darkness of one of the planes, was devastated. Two and a half years of training had led to disaster. He could not look at the helicopter pilots on board with him and did not want to find Colonel Beckwith forward in the plane. Fitch could only sit there quietly, distraught, with images of the disaster fresh in his mind (Fitch).

On board one EC-130E, the crew began shouting, waking up the passengers who were finally sleeping from exhaustion. The loadmaster told them they were low on fuel and needed to lighten the plane. The rear ramp was lowered and everything they did not need was thrown out the rear. If they were lucky they would at least go down near a US warship and have a chance of rescue. Fortunately, the flight crew squeezed out a few more miles and to everyone's relief the plane landed at Masirah with no fuel left (Haney, 251).

By 0113hs Zulu Time, all the aircraft were out of Iranian airspace. Republic 5 was the last to land at Masirah. At Masirah, despite the security, the British personnel on the base assigned to the sultan of Oman's air force knew what was happening. Sometime after the aircraft limped in, two British personnel came by in a jeep with two cases of beer. Innocuously written on one case was "To you from all of us for having the guts to try."

As the planes landed, Air Force flight surgeons jumped on board to help with the burn victims and other wounded. The men did the best they could to line up in formation to get accurate headcounts and account for the wounded, missing, and dead. When the C-141Bs landed, the wounded were loaded, along with the helicopter pilots and Delta, to take them to Wadi Kena and the burn victims to Germany.

Out at sea, the fighters on board the *Nimitz* and *Coral Sea* were still ready to launch, eager to get into combat. As the minutes ticked by and the temperatures skyrocketed with the rising sun, the US Navy was one order away from unleashing a withering attack on Iran. The first crews on alert were approached by a new crew and told to deplane. They refused,

April 25. Delta, the Rangers, and surviving aircrews return to Wadi Kena, Egypt aboard a C-141 from Masirah. Only 24 hours earlier, they had departed Masirah to rescue the hostages in Tehran. Now, after a string of bad luck, they returned to Wadi Kena. The look of disappointment and shock that the mission fell apart is clearly evident on their faces. Some are still carrying their weapons. Notice the tripod of an M60 machine gun visible and the M72 light antitank weapons. (DoD)

At Wadi Kena on April 25, the rescue party deplanes from a C-141 after arriving from Masirah. Some of the Delta operators are still wearing their dyed black field jackets, pockets stuffed with supplies. Symbolically, the tape covering the American flags remains in place. At the start of the assault on the embassy, they were to take the tape off revealing the flag. They never got the chance. Further back are some of the men from the 1/75th Rangers tasked with guarding the landing zones. They are wearing the standard US Army green uniforms with typical Load Bearing Equipment. One is carrying a M72 LAW. (DoD)

wanting in on the action, and finally left their aircraft only when firmly ordered by the operations officer (Ardaiolo).

Finally, it began to sink in. There would be no action in Iran. Slowly word came out that the rescue mission had ended in disaster. The aircrews, so close to seeing action, were overcome with depression, grief, and anger as the finality of what they were hearing sank in. The US had once again suffered an embarrassing failure. There was disbelief that nothing had been done, either to strike Iranians converging on Desert One, destroy the abandoned helicopters there, or even fly a show of force. Instead, the *Nimitz* carrier group turned south to put some distance between herself and Iran (Brennan).

Back at Wadi Kena, Beckwith was despondent. His sole reason for existence for so many years had been to prepare Delta to perform spectacular missions such as that which the Iranian hostage crisis called for, and on the very first mission, they were left licking their wounds. But he was not about to accept the blame. He focused his rage on General Vaught and called the Marine pilots cowards. He was furious at his own men for leaving weapons and equipment behind. He disparaged Colonel Chuck Pittman who ordered his helicopter to turn around and head back to the *Nimitz* when he became overwhelmed by the second haboob. He then ranted at the drivers, who had nothing to do with the aircraft. Beckwith's rage got the best of him as he motioned towards men that had nothing to with the calamity at Desert One.

The rescue mission returns to Wadi Kena on April 25 on board a C-141, clearly disappointed over the string of bad luck that led to the collision at Desert One, the deaths of their fellow countrymen, and the fact that they were unable to reach Tehran and rescue the hostages. One of the Delta operators has a pair of night vision goggles around his neck. He also has a length of sling rope tied around his waist, a common item that Colonel Beckwith wanted the men to have. The Ranger on the right has at least three LAWs on his back. (DoD)

The 13-man Special Forces Ministry of Foreign Affairs assault team thought at one point he was insulting them. Beckwith at first complimented them for their efforts, but then drifted off into dressing down the men for not grabbing their weapons on the way out of the aircraft. They were lucky to be alive, and the weapons and the gear were the last thing on their minds. Beckwith was also furious that no airstrike had been called in on the remaining helicopters after Delta had been unable to destroy them because of the confusion, chaos, and danger of burning aircraft and exploding munitions. On the way back to the United States later, Beckwith admitted he was wrong in some of his criticism and apologized (Beckwith, 258–260, Bowden 483–485, Fitch).

On April 25, in Wadi Kena, the rescue party walks down the runway from the CI-141 that brought them from Masirah after the mission ended in disaster. They will soon be on their way back to the United States, having never made it to Tehran to rescue the 53 American hostages. (DoD)

Dick Meadows finally heard what had happened from, of all people, Ross Perot, Texas business tycoon and friend of the special forces community. Up until then, he assumed the mission had only suffered a temporary setback and would be launched again. The news was devastating. As he listened to Perot recount the President's statement to the American people, Meadows was shocked at what happened and then sickened by the next part of the call – all of the mission information – the locations of the warehouse, safe houses, Iranian contacts, his contact name of *Esquire* and just about everything the Iranians would need to piece together who had helped with the mission – had been left in one of the helicopters abandoned intact at Desert One. Stuck in Tehran, Meadows had three options. Drive to Turkey, try to get out by a helicopter pick-up in the south, or drive to Tehran airport and get out with his Irish passport. Getting caught and tortured was scary enough, but what Meadows feared most was being paraded in front of Iranian mobs and television cameras as a captured spy. He decided to give the airport a try and was able to make it out (Hoe, 160–163).

Lahidji turned on the TV to hear that Iranian state broadcasters were announcing that several American planes had crashed, and all the Zionist rescuers were now dead. He had to get out of Iran fast, either by going to Tabriz and the border with Turkey, or heading south to Abadan on the Persian Gulf to get out by sea. He decided to make his way to the Gulf because he was familiar with the area from when he was in secondary school living with his uncle. It was a 13-hour nerve-wracking ride down to the coast. At Abadan, he found some old friends and stayed with them for a couple of days until he could arrange to be smuggled to Kuwait on board a fishing boat for $150 (Lahidji, 21–24).

Some of the wounded aircrews are taken into the hospital at a US base in West Germany after their long flight back from the Middle East following the calamity. (Photo by Tim Bauer/Fairfax Media via Getty Images)

Fred Arooji knew he was in serious trouble as Iranian TV broadcast the images of Desert One and said there were American agents in Tehran. He wanted to try for the Turkish border, but ended up lying low in Tehran for a couple of weeks before finally getting out. All of the covert personnel sent on the highly dangerous missions inside Tehran were able to eventually get out alive, but for some, their fate was unknown for several harrowing weeks.

THE AFTERMATH

President Jimmy Carter, devastated by news of the disaster at Desert One, prepares to address the American people. The raid was not met with universal support during planning, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance had turned in his resignation in protest over the decision. President Carter would be frustrated by the hostage crisis until his tireless efforts finally secured their release on January 20, 1981. Partially as a result of the Iranian crisis, President Carter was defeated in his re-election bid by Ronald Reagan. To this day, President Carter remains haunted by the disaster (Bettmann/Getty Images).

On Friday, April 25, Carter addressed the nation in the morning, then briefed the Senate and House leadership. At the time, except for a couple that Carter called "asses," the elected representatives were supportive of the attempt (Carter, 422). A direct Iranian contact with Hamilton Jordan, Carter's chief of staff, called and warned, "How stupid of your country to try this. You are going to get the hostages killed!" Jordan responded, "Let me warn you that if any harm comes to a single one of our hostages, Iran will pay – and pay dearly!" Jordan later called two more intermediaries and warned them "that if anything happens to our people in Tehran, there will be war." (Jordan, 276).

On April 27, Zbigniew Brzezinski and President Jimmy Carter flew to Camp Peary, Virginia to meet with Colonel Beckwith and Delta. Beckwith, in tears, apologized, saying "I'm sorry we let you down!" They embraced, and the President thanked him for what they had tried. Beckwith wanted to know, "Will you let us go back?" (Beckwith, 262).

Back at Rhein-Main AB, US European Command wanted volunteers to escort the remains of the crews killed at Desert One back to the US as soon as the Iranians released them. Even though they had been operating non-stop for several days, the crews of the returning aircraft volunteered without hesitation (Utarro, 34). Unfortunately, the Iranians were going to hold the remains of the men to gain as much propaganda value as they could. The first Iranian soldiers on the scene, finally alerted to a calamity in the desert by the bus passengers, actually fled the scene quickly. They did not know what they had come across and wanted no part of it in case it was part of an attempted Iranian military coup. Iranian president Adbol Hassan Bani-Sadr and Ayatollah Khomeini denounced the Americans and the Iranians made wild claims of the number of American dead and the size of the invading force. At a press conference, held

at the embassy, the Iranians first expressed condolences to the families, then displayed the body bags and remains of the men who had burned to death in the collision (Bowden, 478–479). After five days the remains of the eight killed at Desert One were transported to Geneva, Switzerland via an International Red Cross flight, accompanied by Archbishop Capucci of the Vatican (Zablocki, 170). They were then picked up by a C-141B and flown to Dover AFB, Delaware in flag-draped coffins.

On May 9, a ceremony was held at Arlington National Cemetery to honor those who perished in the mission. The ceremony, attended by President Carter, the mission planners, Colonel Beckwith, and the families of those killed, was emotional, ending with a missing-man formation flyover.

At Arlington Cemetery in Washington, DC this simple memorial honors the men who perished during Operation *Eagle Claw*. (DoD)

On May 15, Carter went to the Pentagon to meet with the mission's aircraft crews, planners, and clandestine operators to thank them for trying (Carter, 428). Carter could take solace in meeting with members of the military because in the press he was being savaged for the failure. Editorials around the country were almost uniform in their criticism and anger at what they perceived as a complete failure by the military. While the hostage crisis had given Carter a boost in the public opinion polls to nearly 60 percent approval (Gallup), that rating plummeted to less than 30 percent after the failure of the raid. Nationally, the crisis played havoc with the American election of 1980, in which Carter was at first reluctant to actively campaign due to the ongoing crisis, and in which the Republican candidate, Ronald Reagan, spoke of the "humiliation and disgrace" of the country at the hands of Iran.

The raid was widely condemned around the world as unwarranted. Countries in which US forces that participated in the raid were based were furious at not being informed ahead of time. Oman threatened to withdraw from a basing agreement with the US and only a personal letter from President Carter helped ease tensions. President Sadat of Egypt, who had criticized the US for not being more forceful, publicly feigned surprise at the mission, but privately assured the US of his continued support. (State) Japanese opposition to US bases on Okinawa gained strength when it was learned that the 1st SOS, based there, was part of the raid. When one of the raid aircraft later landed in Rota Naval Air Station in Spain while in transit home, the base commander informed the pilot that the Spanish government knew what they had just done and wanted the plane off Spanish territory immediately (Utarro, 33).

On May 24, the International Court of Justice in The Hague censured the US for attempting to rescue the hostages. The logic of the censure was that the rescue attempt undermined the international court's process of trying to resolve the crisis and the mission aggravated the tension between the two countries. The judges from Russia and Syria dissented, wanting stronger action against the US because they felt the operation, conducted despite Iran not harming any hostages, was not a justifiable use of force (Kreisberg, ed., 340).

Moscow, always eager to poke a stick in the Americans' eye, condemned the rescue attempt and any use of force against Iran during a meeting with the Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko and American ambassador to Moscow Thomas Watson Jr. on May 27, 1980. Gromyko put the Soviet reaction in unmistakable terms: "We resolutely condemn US military action against Iran and there can be no other approach. Iran did not invite you, you did yourself. No one objectively can agree to your military action. We resolutely condemn any use of force in Iran in any form."

The investigations

On May 1, General Jones ordered Beckwith to fully brief the press on the operation. Despite appealing to General Meyer over the order, he still found himself in the press briefing room that afternoon. Beckwith's personality showed through in the briefing, and his bluntness established in the public's eye the persona of a no-nonsense commando. He expressed his anger and frustration at the helicopters being late, any second-guessing on whether to proceed with the mission, leaving the dead crew behind, and if he was going to be forced to resign or be fired (Beckwith, 265).

The sight of abandoned helicopters, charred wreckage of airplanes, and the dead Americans, burned beyond recognition, was crippling to America's morale. The public demanded to know what went wrong. The Senate Armed Services Committee opened its hearings on May 7, 1980, barely two weeks after the collision at Desert One.

The committee was limited to only investigating what went wrong up to Desert One. Senator Barry Goldwater insisted that nobody be demoted or reprimanded for the failures (Thigpen, 231). The central issues were to find out what lessons needed to be learned, and how to prevent the same mistakes in the future. The first discovered a litany of problems, and the solution for the second was to establish a permanent task force responsible for the counterterrorism mission. It would take another six years for the recommendation to become law when the Defense Appropriations Act

The wreckage at Desert One with the remains of an RH-53D in the foreground and the remains of Republic 4, a EC-130, and Bluebeard 3, a RH-53D, in the background after their collision. An Iranian UH-1 Huey sits in the background. An abandoned RH-53D also sits by, left behind by the withdrawing Americans. The reason Desert One was selected as a rendezvous point is perfectly clear. The terrain is extremely flat and free of obstacles. (Bettmann/ Getty Images)

of 1986 established the new US Special Operations Command (Thigpen, 231). Beckwith was asked what went wrong and how to fix it. Beckwith responded:

> In Iran we had an ad hoc affair. We went out, found bits and pieces, people and equipment, brought them together and then asked them to perform a highly complex mission. The parts all performed but they didn't necessarily perform as a team. Nor did they all have the same motivation. My recommendation is to put together an organization which contains everything it will ever need, an organization which would include Delta, the Rangers, Navy SEALS, Air Force pilots, its own staff, its own support people, its own aircraft and helicopters. Make this organization a permanent military unit. Give it a place to call home. Allocate sufficient funds to run it. And give it sufficient time to recruit, assess, and train its people. Otherwise, we are not serious about combating terrorism. (Beckwith, 268).

The House Armed Services Committee held two weeks' worth of hearings also in May 1980, and again calling a number of the key actors to testify. Fixated on more of the technical details than the Senate committee was, the Hill eventually relented and turned to the Joint Chiefs of Staff to set up a more thorough investigation.

This commission was formally called the Special Operations Review Group, known as the Holloway Commission, after the chairman of the investigation, Admiral James L. Holloway III. The purpose of this body was to conduct a complete top-to-bottom investigation of what went wrong and how to fix it. The Holloway Commission reviewed all documents, orders, training regimes, aircraft models, plans, personnel, and every possible relevant factor in the mission. The commission interviewed all key personnel and travelled to Fort Bragg and Hurlburt Field for further briefings. While at Hurlburt, they watched veterans of the mission perform black-out landings at Holley Field. Even demonstrations of seizing the airfield and embassy assault were conducted for the commission.

The burned-out hulk of the EC-130, Republic 4, rests at Desert One. The barren landscape in this daytime photo was a hellish nightmare of blowing sand, pitch black, and the deafening roar of aircraft and helicopter engines. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

The proximity of one destroyed and one intact RH-53D at Desert One shows why the men quickly scrambled out of Desert One. The fear of exploding ammunition and fuel sparking a chain reaction was palpable and the men did not want to take their chances of losing more aircraft. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

By August 1980, the commission concluded that the mission was simply an incredibly high-risk mission and no single action or decision could be blamed for its failure. Among its conclusions were:

- The operation was feasible and was the best option available once the decision was made to conduct the operation;
- Command and control was good at the upper echelons, but confusing at the ground level;
- There were enough external resources to support the operation;
- Planning was good except for the number of backup helicopters and weather;
- The Desert One location was a higher risk than the planners realized;
- The two primary factors contributing to failure were the helicopters and the weather.

The Holloway Commission concluded that without an established Joint Task Force in place to respond to any crisis, the entire operation, from finding personnel to the execution of the operation, had to be devised out of thin air, greatly increasing the likelihood of problems. The amount of operational security preventing vital information from being shared at nearly every stage was also a critical failure.

The first commander of the new Special Operations Command, General James Lindsay. The unified command structure for United States Special Operations Forces was activated in 1987, and incorporates units trained and equipped for the full spectrum of tasks required for successful, complex special operations. Its development was a direct result of the lessons learned from the disaster at Desert One and the Holloway Commission. (DoD)

The Holloway Commission issued two recommendations: first, establish a permanent Counterterrorist Joint Task Force and permanently assign staff and forces to it. And second, establish a Special Operations Advisory Panel. Based on these recommendations, the US Special Operations Command was established in 1987.

An after-action review of weather conditions and the mission ordered by General Jones, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, found that Major Buchanan's team accurately forecasted the weather for the operation, failing only to spot the haboobs, but haboobs presented a challenge of "beyond

the state of the art to forecast with any degree of reliability." Another review by the Secretary of Defense concluded likewise. Like so much in the operation, the inability to properly integrate weather forecasting and conditions into the plan failed because operational security prevented a closer working relationship with Buchanan's team. Additionally, because there was so little meteorological information coming out of Iran, the mission should have had weather forward observers on the ground in Iran leading up to the mission, who could have provided better information that could have led to a decision to delay the mission or change routes. But the insertion and recovery of forward weather observers would have added another level of complexity to the operation (Benson).

Today, pieces of the American helicopters from the failed raid are on display at the embassy, since renamed the "Den of Espionage." At Desert One, an exhibit of aircraft boasts of what the Iranians considered a victory over the Americans. This display includes a mockup of an RH-53D and the fuselage of a small German passenger plane. (Behrouz Mehri/AFP/ Getty Images)

Kyle pinned a lot of the blame on the Air Weather Service, unaware of their attempts to warn mission planners about the possibility of haboobs. He was furious when he learned of their inability to predict haboobs and he was furious that the Joint Task Force was naïve enough to believe the weather would be clear all the way in and thus no planning was undertaken for bad weather (Kyle, 328). Perhaps the harshest criticism of the lack of weather information during the mission is in the Air Force's Doctrine 2-9.1 Weather Operations published in 2006, which states "The lack of weather preparations in Operation EAGLE CLAW cost the United States military equipment, effectiveness, and, most importantly, lives" (Weather Operations, 22).

The second rescue plan: Operation *Snowbird*

Out of fear of what the Iranians would do next, planning for a second mission to rescue the hostages kicked off almost immediately after *Eagle Claw* failed. On April 26, 1980, planning began under Operation *Snowbird*. General David Jones, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was told to prepare a new rescue plan and to be deputy commander of the force. General Richard V. Secord, a 24-year veteran of the Air Force and special operations, was given command of the mission.

This time, however, the hostages would likely be dispersed all over the city, presenting a whole new set of challenges for the rescuers. The basics remained the same though: Delta would seize the embassy and other locations, while the Rangers would seize an airfield, and the 1st Special Operations Wing would provide the air support. Detachment A from Berlin was again tasked to storm the Ministry of Foreign Affairs if any hostages were still there. By the summer of 1980, the operation already had 2,377 personnel and 136 aircraft, practicing different scenarios for the new mission, even conducting a large-scale exercise in July called Exercise *Rusty Badger*.

The Joint Test Directorate sought to eliminate the weak link of any operation into Iran, the reliance on heavy lift helicopters, under Project *Honey Badger*. This radical vision entailed C-130s flying non-stop from the US, conducting five inflight refuelings along the way, flying low-level into

The planned second rescue attempt, *Credible Sport,* would have relied on the capability of specially modified C-130s to perform extreme short-field landings and take-offs, assisted by a series of rockets for thrust, braking, and stability. This test ended with a misfiring rocket that caused the destruction of the aircraft. (DoD)

Former hostage Elizabeth Ann Swift celebrates her freedom shortly after her release on January 20, 1981. The hostages were aware a rescue attempt by America had failed within days of the mission. The hostages were moved around to thwart another rescue attempt. The freed hostages would refer to all of the men who tried to rescue them as heroes. (DoD)

and through Iran to avoid detection, landing in the soccer field, picking up Delta and the freed hostages, flying out of Iran and, finally, landing on an aircraft carrier off the coast. This idea became known as *Credible Sport*.

The C-130 was designed to land on short, unimproved airfields, but landing in a soccer stadium, and then on an aircraft carrier, required landing and taking off in about 100 yards, loaded down with rescuers, hostages, and wounded. It was all but impossible. The solution was to mount rockets on the C-130 to decelerate the plane for landing, give it speed and lift to take-off, and provide stabilization.

On October 17, 1980, three modified C-130s, the aircraft designated XFC-130H, began practicing the improbable feat. The heavily modified planes had a total of 30 rockets added to them to pull off landing and departing from a soccer stadium. Eight MK-12 antisubmarine rocket (ASROC) motors were fixed, pointing forward, to slow the plane down for landing. Eight MK-78 rocket motors were mounted above the wheel wells, pointed downward to brake the descent. Eight MK-56 rocket motors were mounted on the lower rear fuselage, pointing rearward and downwards at a 45-degree angle for take-off assistance. Two Shrike rocket motors were mounted in pairs on each wing pylon for stabilization between take-off and level flight, and two more MK-12 rockets were fixed in front to the tail. Two ventral fins forward of the horizontal stabilizers and a dorsal fin were added. Double-slotted flaps and ailerons were extended and modified for low-speed flight. To stop the plane during landing on the aircraft carrier, a tail hook was added forward of the rear ramp. (Thigpen, 242).

Ten days of testing different components appeared to be going well except for a problem with the onboard computers that needed additional calibration to fire rockets in sequence. On October 29, during a full test of the system the initial test went well, as the rockets lifted the nose gear 6ft off the ground after only 10ft of the take-off run. Within 150ft the aircraft was airborne, and in about 100 yards the plane had 30ft altitude and was moving at 115 knots.

As the plane came in for landing to test its rocket-assisted short-field landing, the deceleration rockets in the front of the fuselage were fired, blinding the flight navigator, who fired the remaining lower rockets, causing a rapid deceleration and loss of altitude. The right wing broke off when it hit the runway, and the plane caught fire. The entire crew managed to escape but the plane was completely destroyed.

The end of the hostage crisis

Events in Iran and Washington were moving back toward a diplomatic solution soon after the *Credible Sport* crash. With the commencement of the Iran–Iraq War on September 22, 1980, Tehran needed money and as much diplomatic support as it could get, including the 11 billion dollars in assets frozen by the US. Negotiations continued through fall 1980, with the US and Iran using intermediators from Algeria. President Ronald Reagan's election on November 4, 1980 made it highly unlikely that President Carter would use force between the election and inauguration, but military contingency planning continued and, as late as December 1980, permission was sought to conduct reconnaissance missions into Iran to survey landing sites under Operation *Tin Horn* (Lenahan, 184–186).

Finally, on January 20, 1981, the remaining 52 hostages were freed after 444 days of captivity, meeting President Carter at Rhein-Main Air Base in Frankfurt on January 21. President Carter remained haunted by the catastrophe at Desert One. Over the years whenever he was asked what one thing he would have changed about his presidency, he would always say, "I would have sent one more helicopter (Carter, 530)."

At Arlington Cemetery in Washington, DC, a simple memorial stands in remembrance of the eight Americans who died in the rescue attempt, with an engraved brass plate on the white marble tombstone reading:

> *In Honor of Members of the United States Armed Forces who Died During an Attempt to Rescue American Hostages Held in Iran 25 April 1980:*
> *US Air Force: Captain Harold L. Lewis, Jr.; Captain Lyn D. McIntosh; Captain Richard L. Bakke; Captain Charles T. McMillian; Technical Sergeant Joel C. Mayo.*
> *US Marine Corps: Staff Sergeant Dewey L. Johnson; Sergeant John D. Harvey; Corporal George N. Holms, Jr.*

BELOW LEFT
On November 17, 1979, the Iranians released 13 American hostages to secure a propaganda victory. From left: Elizabeth Montagne, Terry Tedford, Jean Walsh, Lillian Johnson, David Walter, Lloyd Rawbin, Westley Williams, Terry Robinson, James Hughes and James Vincent. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

BELOW RIGHT
Finally, after 444 days of captivity, the American hostages were released on January 20, 1981 and were flown to Rhein-Main Air Base in West Germany after being released from Tehran. The "Algiers Accords" that secured their release called for the US to release Iranian $8 billion in assets seized after the fall of the embassy. Eight American servicemen had died trying to rescue them and the political and military upheavals the crisis caused are still felt today. At the top is Jerry Plotkin; waving is Robert Ode. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

In the intervening years, the resounding criticism of Operation *Eagle Claw* remains the same – the mission was too complex and too risky. Both observations are true, but the degree of risk depends on historical and situational context as it existed then, in spring 1980, and not now. Americans at the time were horrified and despondent over the failure, coming so close on the heels of the withdrawal from Vietnam. The American people could not be blamed for asking if the US simply could not win a war and whether the US was now the world's punching bag. The US looked longingly at Israel's incredible rescue of its hostages in Entebbe in 1976. If the Israelis could pull off that amazing and complex operation, why could the US not do something similar?

The answers to those queries lie with the same questions *Eagle Claw* planners faced on November 4, 1979. How could a rescue mission successfully free several dozen people held captive in a large compound in the middle of a city of four million, inside a hostile country in an area where not every country was entirely friendly with the US? To even try was risky enough, but in the middle of the Cold War with the Soviets, where every action or lack of action could have profound strategic effects, not trying was not an option. And with the unpredictability of the Iranian Revolution, could the US simply sit by while its citizens, members of the diplomatic community, were tried and executed in Tehran? There is no doubt that President Carter had to try something.

Unfortunately, whatever President Carter tried, it was going to be a mission of almost incomprehensible complexity, requiring technology in its infancy, and men mastering skills and tactics new to almost all of them. Communications equipment, night vision technology, infrared equipment, clandestine landing systems, and other equipment had to be acquired, trained on, and issued. While Delta and the Rangers had trained intensively in such

skills as room clearing and capturing and holding airfields, many other personnel would have very little time to train and then do their best in such specialized tasks as flying helicopters in urban environments under fire or night-time rendezvous and refueling. It is great testament to their motivation and their attitudes that they threw themselves at what they all knew was an incredibly dangerous venture.

If there is one thing to blame for the disaster at Desert One, it was the level of paranoia in operational security, which subsequently made the mission riskier and more dangerous than it had to be. Already facing a near-impossible task to rescue the hostages, the restrictions on the mission planners virtually guaranteed the mission's failure.

This stained-glass window at the Hubert Field chapel is a memorial to the eight servicemen who died at Desert One. Each of the eight diamonds represents one of the fallen. (USAF)

Concerns that the Soviets or others might glean information from the preparations and relay them to Iran drove almost every single decision. Countries to base out of, such as Turkey, were eliminated, thus increasing flight times and distances. Full-scale rehearsals were never practiced. Pilots were selected so as not to tip off foreign agents something was going on. Radio silence was practiced, denying mission components critical information on weather. Cover stories prevented helicopters from getting proper shakedowns and maintenance. Friendly special forces were kept out of the picture. The restrictions kept the entire operation from becoming the cohesive fighting force that was so desperately needed to pull off a high-risk mission such as this. It is easy to fault many of the other factors in the mission, but from the strategic level, the overwhelming desire to maintain operational security drove every other decision, which caused so many problems at each layer of mission planning and execution.

With 40 years of hindsight, it is easy to dismiss Operation *Eagle Claw* as too risky a plan. However, in the atmosphere of the Cold War – when many countries were looking at the US and USSR, trying to decide which side to align with – not to try, to sit by idly while its embassy fell, would have been devastating to America's image and an incalculable sign of weakness. Short of war, President Carter was given the best option possible.

The public's memory of Operation *Eagle Claw* is inexorably linked to the collision at Desert One. Unfortunately, that image overshadows everything that went on to get the US in position to launch the raid. There were dozens of aircraft, carrier battle groups, commandos on the ground, undercover agents in Iran, and support players in Oman, Egypt, Washington, and elsewhere, all working around the clock to rescue the 53 Americans held in Tehran.

The US military learned many lessons from Operation *Eagle Claw*. In the years to come, in places like Grenada, Panama, Iraq, Afghanistan, and many other far-off lands, US Special Operations Forces would be called upon time and time again. Even decades later, their successes can be traced back to the disaster of April 1980. It may have come at a high price, but the extraordinary abilities of today's US Special Operations Forces arose from the ashes of Desert One.

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COVER ART

Deep inside Iran, the RH-53D helicopters needed for the assault on the embassy, having made it through one haboob unscathed, are suddenly faced with a much larger and stronger haboob at least 100 miles across. They are less than 200 miles from Desert One and the rendezvous with the C-130s carrying their fuel and the rescuers but the sight before them is terrifying. Their tight formation will soon be scattered and the crews badly shaken trying to fight their way through the storm. One helicopter, Bluebeard 5, will even give up and turn around.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Assembling a comprehensive look at Operation *Eagle Claw* 40 years after the raid was a challenge because of a number of factors. First and foremost, this was a highly classified operation and some details still remain classified. Additionally, the first-person accounts published in the first ten years after the raid were hampered by the remaining secrecy, faulty transliterations of manuscripts, and errors in memory of some of the operational details of the mission. Unfortunately, some of these errors still surface from time to time in current works. Finally, the photographic record is sparse. While there are several photos of different aircraft before the raid and Desert One after the calamity, the only known photos of Delta going into action are a series taken by Delta's photographer SFC Joseph J. "Joe" Sumakeris. This remarkable series captures Delta boarding aircraft the day of the raid and Delta returning from the disaster only 24 hours later.

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In 1992, thousands of pages of documents related to the raid, including actual radio recordings, were declassified and released publicly. Needless to say, they provided a treasure trove of information. Some of the tense radio transmissions during the mission are included in this work. Several different log books included in these documents also helped pin down the sequence of events.

Disclaimer: The contents of this work are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of any body of the US government. All errors are those of the author.